THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.

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NAPOLEON SOLO • ILLYA KURYAKIN

They alone are feared by THRUSH.

Together they had sworn to seek out and destroy THRUSH'S plan to enslave the free world in —

THE BEAUTY AND BEAST AFFAIR

A Complete Novel of Shocking Terror

THE BEAUTY AND BEAST AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

Trapped, at gunpoint, they heard THRUSH's deadly ultimatum crackle over the airways across the world: "Give us this machine which can destroy nations—or Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin die!"

ACT I—INCIDENT OF THE SLAIN AGENT

NAPOLEON SOLO and Alexander Waverly locked stunned gazes across the forgotten device they'd been inspecting in the command room at United Network headquarters.

Illya Kuryakin slain.

The incredible words erupted, sharply white, on the televised instant-bulletin screen.

Solo felt ill. Illya dead? After the first harsh moment of shocked disbelief, he sagged, immobilized by a sense of loss, deep grief. The slender young U.N.C.L.E agent brought his hand up, dragging it across his mouth. His elbow bumped the concealed shoulder holster and U.N.C.L.E. Special. Weaponry there to inflict death or to outwit it one more time. Thirty-seven ounces, including silencer—the man who carried this weapon accepted all obligations, risks. Risk of death remained constant.

But Solo's handsome young face, wry-pulled mouth, could not conceal his reaction to the impact of this tragic news.

He'd seen death strike, the violent dying of other agents, some working with him, all under his immediate command, but at this moment he felt as if the very rock of Manhattan Island might sink under him.

"It can't be!" Alexander Waverly spoke in unconcealed outrage.

Solo saw grief in the old soldier's face. Now one of the five men— each from a different mother nation—heading United Network Command, Waverly was a veteran of two world wars. He wore every medal and honor, many bestowed post-war by former enemy nations, for gallantry, bravery beyond the call of duty. Waverly had been embroiled most of his life in hand- to-hand combat with violent death.

Waverly's hand still gripped the activating switch of the atom-separator he'd been demonstrating.

They stared at the screen as the first bulletin was replaced by an amplifying message:

"Kuryakin and woman evangelist Ann Nelson Wheat have been executed as spies in Middle-East Zabir by order of Sheik Ali Zud—"

"No!" The word burst across Waverly's mouth. "Sheik Zud himself invited Illya into Zabir as an advisor. This is vilest treachery!"

For one more moment Waverly glared at the atom-separator as if it were somehow guilty. Built like a portable television set, with narrowing barrel instead of screen, the machine gleamed metallically in a room of metal machines, senders, receivers, monitors. The command room was the heart muscle of this huge, never-sleeping organization— United Network Command for Law and Enforcement—spread across the face of the globe, and via electronics into far reaches of space.

The Network Command building, unobtrusive in the Forties near the United Nations complex, was linked with the remotest areas by means of elaborate sending and receiving antennae concealed on its roof, and by secret channels underground, leading to the East River.

Solo tried to remember that urgent business came first. He said, "You were saying that his atom separator came from a THRUSH agent who defected to U.N.C.L.E."

"Yes." Grimly, Waverly too made the effort. "Only the scientist—his name was Polar Fuch—didn't quite make it. THRUSH had him—uh—removed. I he invented the machine, he told me, for peaceful aims, but it has a lethal application, and when he found this was the use THRUSH meant to make of it—"

Waverly gestured downward sharply. "No. It's no good. We'll discuss this thing later."

He swung around to his desk, slapped at the intercom buttons. He spoke in a cold, flat tone that dared his subordinates even to question his command: "I want the ambassador from Zabir in the conference suite. Within the hour. Do you understand? Within the hour."

TWO

ZABIR'S AMBASSADOR Zouida Berikeen looked across the long conference table at the chilled faces of Napoleon Solo and Alexander Waverly.

His heavily accented voice broke, pleadingly: "But I have counted you as my closest friends. Both of you. I shall remain indebted beyond death to you, Solo, for saving my life. Need I remind you? And Alexander—friend since the evil days of the Dardanelles, before my poor little nation even was born!"

"We are not here to talk over old times." Waverly's voice remained implacable. His expression did not alter. His relentless gaze bore into Zouida's face. He nodded toward Solo. "Can you think of any good you could say of this man?"

Solo shrugged, his face also chilled. "Well, he got here in less than an hour."

"So we give him one mark—or one lash—for punctuality," Waverly said icily. "He has fortitude I never suspected, to face us at all after such treachery."

Zouida Berikeen scrubbed his hands over his face. He wore the uniform of the diplomat: morning coat, creased black trousers, stiff shirt. But his hair was uncombed, and sleep showed in the corners of his black eyes. He was a small man, swarthy, and deeply tortured.

"My old friends," he pleaded. "Can't you believe I know no more of this—very little more—than you do? Just what came via bulletin from my poor nation. That's all."

"You said you knew a little more," Solo said grimly. "How little?"

Zouida licked at his mouth. "A direct communiqué with my ruler, the King of Lions, Sheik Zud, asked only that Napoleon Solo come to Zabir to collect the mortal remains, effects and belongings of the lamented Illya Kuryakin. And this bit more—that Sheik Zud is himself bereaved."

"He ordered the execution!" Waverly lashed out.

"True." Zouida paced the carpeting across the table from the agents. "But reluctantly, and with great heartsickness. We all loved Illya Kuryakin. Whatever his crime—and I swear to Allah, and to your own gods—I don't know what it was. Spying. It must have been heinous to force Sheik Zud to take such dreadful action."

Waverly waved his hand. "And this woman, this evangelist, Ann Nelson Wheat? What of her? Was she spying too?"

Zouida nodded, his face showing inner torments. "Yes. She is from your Los Angeles. She has a great following, much like your Billy Graham. The young college students in our country—rebellious as they seem to be all over the world today—want to know more about your religion. Sheik Zud invited this woman, Ann Nelson Wheat, into Zabir. He would let her explain Christianity to the people of Zabir, so they would know what it was—though of course, Zabir and Sheik Zud know only the true God, Mohammed his prophet—"

"And what was the Wheat woman's crime?" Solo prompted.

"Spying. She must have forgotten she was our guest as a religious woman. She was caught photographing secret installations—"

"And what kind of trial did she get?" Waverly said, leaning for ward at the high-glossed table.

Zouida shrugged. "The sheik is a headstrong man, of some violence when aroused." He paused, added almost defiantly, "But he is a good man, better even than he believes."

"Yes," Solo said in irony. "He has a great record."

Tears brimmed the little ambassador's eyes. "Sheik Zud's problems are complex, difficult to comprehend unless you face them. Please do not judge this good, but hard-pressed man, until you know him better. His goodness lights the desert. I ask only that you suspend judgment until Napoleon Solo returns with his report."

When they were alone in the long conference room, both Solo and Waverly sat some moments without moving.

At last Waverly got up and paced the floor, face rutted with thought. "So Sheik Zud—whose goodness lights the desert and whose treachery turns my stomach—wants me to send you to fetch the effects and remains of Illya Kuryakin."

"I'll be pleased to go, Alexander."

"Oh, I'm sure you would. This is one little trip I'd like to take with you." Looking at Waverly, Solo was reminded of a bulldog with the ruff standing at its shoulders. "But we've got to be dispassionate about this. If we act in haste, or in rage, we may be walking into just the mistakes Sheik Zud might be hoping we'll make."

"I would be most alert," Solo said with some savagery.

"I'm positive of this, too. But I've made my decision. Where is Wanda Mae Kim?"

Solo's mouth sagged open. "On assignment. Why?"

The faintest smile tugged at Waverly's mouth. "Oh, I understand your consternation. No, I'm not senile. No more than usual, any how. I realize as well as you, Solo, that Wanda worked in our outer offices, and is the newest of your recruits—"

"On the least urgent of all assignments," Solo reminded him.

Waverly straightened. "I've made my decision, Solo. Zabir and Sheik Zud will anticipate my sending you to collect Illya's belongings. Since, as you say, Wanda handles only the most petty assignments, surely she won't be missed on whatever occupies her. Bring her in to me at once."

Solo gazed at Waverly incredulously, then he straightened and nodded. He had his orders.

* * *

THE UNITED Command helicopter hovered for a moment above the west-side tenement building. On the seat beside the pilot, Solo gazed down at the grime-crusted buildings, the crowded early-afternoon streets.

He said, "Can you put her down on this roof?"

The pilot nodded. He was a dark-haired man in his twenties, with a devil-may-care smile for any peril. "I can put her down anywhere. That's why you hired me. Remember?"

"Knew there must have been some reason," Solo said. He spoke over his shoulder to the three agents in the dome cabin. "Hang on. Sunday Driver is going to chop his way in through the clotheslines."

Sunday Driver grinned, settled the chopper easily to the black roofing. Pigeons fluttered up in panic and a cloud of dust and debris smoked upward.

Solo opened the plastic door and swung down. He checked his vest- pocket sender for channel and efficiency.

"Sit tight," he told his agents. "I won't be a minute."

"If there's any glory in it, or a chance for a raise, call me, will you?" one of the agents called after Napoleon Solo, grinning.

"Don't forget we're double- parked," the pilot called.

Solo didn't glance back. He went through the stairway door, down to the fifteenth floor without hesitation, aware that doors were cracked open, his progress followed.

On the fifteenth floor, he strode directly to a door at the end of the shabby corridor.

He removed a small, conelike device from his pocket, placed it against the door facing. Sounds came through subdued, but as clearly as if he were on the inner side of the wall.

Moving smoothly, but without undue haste, he took a cylinder much like a hair-spray refill tube from his jacket. Placing it at the edge of the door, he sprayed around it in a continuous movement from floor upward and across the top, down the other side.

The fluid ate away the wood like concentrated acid on metal. The door quivered. Solo touched it with the tip of his finger, and it fell away into the room.

Solo's first view, of that interior was less than reassuring.

His gaze was drawn to Wanda Mae Kim.

Wanda Mae was outlandishly decorative under any conditions, and she managed to be eye-catching even in the trying circumstances in which she had managed to become involved.

She was not only involved, she was entangled. Her trim ankles were secured by leather leashes to almost opposite poles of the room. Her China-gold arms were stretched by other leashes high above her head.

She lay like the black-haired, ruby-mouthed adornment of the center of a particularly unappetizing bargain-basement carpeting. Her eyes, like dark opals, were wide with terror.

Her form-clinging skirt had been ripped up the side; her dragon-embroidered blouse was torn, smudged with dirt. A streak of dirt was like a scar across the glaze of her ceramic-smooth cheeks.

Even so, she was bewitching.

This could not be said for the other occupants of the room.

They were grouped about her, each with his own sadistic weapon of torture. There were four of them, one wearing the blue uniform of the New York City police force.

He was as intent upon torture as his three comrades. He knelt beside Wanda, holding the bright tip of a cigarette within inches of her eyes. Her beauty left him unmoved. His florid face sweated with concentration.

This was true of all of them. They had little in common except the evil in their faces, the tools of torment in their fists—and the common bond of their vile racket.

A slender, sunken-chested man brandished a thin, narrow whip, cracking it within inches of Wanda's bared golden legs. A stout, balding man in plaid jacket and ankle-length slacks held a dripping hypodermic and needle. The youngest, swarthy, greasy-haired, black bangs eye-length, waited with a switch-blade knife for his turn.

So intent upon their prisoner were the four thugs that the door tell, air whipping across them, before they reacted.

They lunged around, and the cop leaped to his feet, going for the gun at his holster.

Wanda saw Solo first. Her straight, shoulder-length black hair waved as she rolled her head back and forth in anguish, crying out, "I didn't tell them

anything! I didn't!"

Solo spared her only a brief glance that warned he'd deal with her later for her fearful breach of direct orders.

Since the cop had reacted first, Napoleon Solo gave him his immediate attention.

He did not draw the U.N.C.L.E. Special from its shoulder holster.

Instead he drew from his inner jacket pocket what appeared to be a wallet. But when he pressed its safety catch; a barrel the length of the wallet plunged outward. He fired it by pressing the same catch, so his movement was fluid, and no time was wasted.

There was a sharp sound like "*thid*!"

A pellet erupted from the barrel and struck the cop squarely in the neck.

It was as if the big man had been stung by a wasp in flight. He threw his right hand up, slapping at the place he'd been struck. His hand closed on his neck—and he found himself unable to withdraw it. In those brief seconds the pellet's fluid had stunned him, and he stood immobile, his hand grasping at his neck. He tried to move and he could not.

The long-haired boy was next, because his reactions were fastest. The boy wheeled around, stared for a moment at Solo. In that instant, his reactions named Solo enemy, and he lowered his hand to his side to hurl the knife in a fierce underhanded pitch directly at Solo's buckle. It would have seemed impossible for him to miss at this close range.

Perhaps it would have been, except that the second pellet from Solo's nerve-gun caught the boy in the center of his bangs. It struck at the moment he'd started his upswing and the knife floated harmlessly past Solo's head.

The boy tried to straighten, but he remained as if frozen in that unbalanced pose, arm extended.

The other two men apparently were on junk, Solo decided. Their reactions were slow, less than deliberate, though obviously each thought he was moving with the speed of light.

The stout man came around in an almost languid movement, slashing at Solo with the whip, brandishing it.

Solo let him take two steps away from where Wanda was secured to the floor. He pressed the safety, watched the pellet strike the stout man in the belly. He gasped, as if unable to breathe, and then stood rigid, whip high in upreaching arm.

The thin man flicked the lighted cigarette directly into Solo's face.

Solo side-stepped deftly. The tall man leaped toward a straight chair, reaching out for it.

Solo pressed the button. The pellet splatted just behind the tall man's outsized ear. He bent forward another three inches and then ceased all movement, arms outstretched, eyes distended.

On the floor, Wanda sobbed in relief.

Solo still did not glance toward her. He surveyed the room, finding the evidence that United Network Command had been after. He collected it carefully.

Wanda's tear-wet eyes widened as he watched him.

When he had everything he wanted, Napoleon Solo checked the unmoving men.

Pleased, he removed the vest-pocket sender, spoke into it. "Sunday Driver. Sunday Driver. Caesar here. Four passengers. One way. Come and pick them up. Over and out."

He recoiled the barrel of the pellet gun, folded what now looked like a wallet again and replaced it in his inner pocket.

Wanda said hesitantly, from the floor, "What have you done to them?"

"Neuroquixonal," Solo answered without looking at her. "Just stunned them. We'll let the police have them after the boys at Command have worked them over."

"They—tortured me," Wanda said in that hesitant tone.

He shrugged. "You asked for it." At this moment, the three standby agents entered the room. One of them laughed. "What have you done, Solo? Robbed Madame Taussaud's wax-works?"

"Yeah," said another. "And get a gander at that China doll somebody forgot and left on the floor."

"Very funny!" Wanda cried savagely from the floor, fighting at her bonds.

Solo loosened the leashes, quickly, as the agents carried out the prisoners.

"Head 'em out," he said.

Wanda sat up, her lovely lip quivering. She massaged at her reddened wrists. "They tortured me, boss," she said. "But I didn't tell them anything. Honest."

Solo was giving the room one last quick check.

"I only wanted to make you proud of me!" Wanda wept.

Solo looked at her now. She seemed to shrink under the heat of his gaze. He shrugged, kept his voice low. He held out his hand, lifting her to her feet.

"All right," he said. "Let's go."

THREE

"SO THIS IS what kept you!" Waverly prowled the Command room, glaring from time to time at Wanda, who was huddled in his chair. She looked small, dejected. "Why didn't you let those junkies finish her off?"

"I was strongly tempted," Solo said mildly.

"I thought I was doing the right thing, sir," Wanda whispered timidly.

Waverly turned and stared down at her across his desk. "The right thing? Deliberately, willfully disobeying direct orders? Is this your notion of doing the right thing, young woman? If it is, we've been sadly remiss in your instructions."

"I was told what to do," Wanda admitted breathlessly.

Waverly nodded. "I'm sure you were. And what was that?"

"To—watch them, sir. And to— report."

"Watch! And report!" Each word was like the crack of a high- powered rifle directed at her.

"Report, yes, sir."

"Report," Waverly said "That means tell us what you saw; not get yourself trapped, tied up, and our whole operation exposed."

"I didn't tell them anything, sir!" Wanda protested.

"No. You didn't. No thanks to your native stoicism, but to the timely arrival of Mr. Solo. No, I can't rate you very highly on this performance, young woman."

"Please, sir, listen to me! I was so sure I could take them. You see, this policeman promised to help me."

"Policeman!" Waverly looked as if he might suffer a stroke. "You took the city police into your confidence? Told him what you were after?"

"He seemed so nice, so anxious to help."

"Anxious to help?" Now Waverly turned, staring at Solo for some explanation.

"He was one of the gang, sir," Solo said mildly.

Waverly seemed unable to speak for some moments. Wanda sat with her face pressed into her hands, watching them through her splayed fingers, her velvet-dark eyes alight with fear.

"Well, Solo," Waverly said at last. "She was promoted into your section—enforcement. You're her immediate superior. What can you say in her defense?"

"She's—very pretty," Solo said noncommittally. "However, I would say she is not ready for the—uh, larger assignments."

"Perhaps she is," Waverly said without sympathy. "Perhaps next time she'll get herself disposed of completely. Then we can write a nice, comforting letter home to her people."

"Just one more chance, Mr. Waverly," Wanda begged. "On my soul, on my illustrious ancestors, I swear—"

"Save your breath. Change your clothes and wash your face," Waverly told her. "I still haven't made up my mind—"

"About my next assignment?" she said hopefully.

"Hardly," he told her. "My problem is more complex. Whether to shoot you in front of the U.N. building, or simply deport you."

Later, Wanda sat beside Solo at the table in the conference room. She seemed smaller, more fragile than ever in the oversized, leather-covered chairs. In beaded black blouse and matching slacks, she looked like the ultimate in a doll-maker's secret formula for Oriental beauty.

Solo patted her hand. She could see he had not forgiven her, but he let her see that he was compassionate.

She gave him a weak smile, but did not speak. She had not spoken since she had entered the room.

At the end of the table, Alexander Waverly sat beside a transcribing machine that clattered politely, making notes of everything the ambassador from Zabir was saying.

Zouida Berikeen had been talking for a long time. When he smiled, as if convinced he had covered everything, either Solo or Waverly would fire another question at him.

"Zabir is four hundred square miles. One million population. Most of it is concentrated in Omar, our principal city and national capitol. The country is poor for farming, most of it desert. There is little industry. But because of the oil, Zabir is one of the richest of the small nations.

"We have hostile neighbors; Xanra to the east of us has a queen who loathes our great Sheik Zud, would do anything to destroy him. We are not a happy nation. We never have been. But we must fight all our enemies if we are to exist."

Zouida sighed and ceased speaking.

"Who heads your country's secret police?" Solo asked.

Zouida nodded gravely. "You would be meeting him when you arrived in Zabir," the ambassador said. "His name is Kiell. While I personally may not like Kiell, I have greatest respect for him. He would give his life without question for our Sultan Zud. I would like to feel I too would die for the great King of Lions, but I am more timid.

"Kiell is a brave man, almost foolhardy. He is of medium height, as dark as I. He has thick hair, but only at his temples and sides and crown. This gives him the look of one with extremely high, slick forehead. His nose is

hooked, his face generally round, and he wears a thick moustache. I assure you, Kiell lives only for his country and his sultan."

"I look forward to meeting him," Solo said. "With all your briefings, you very carefully have not described the physical appearance of your sultan. Haven't you ever seen him face to face?"

Zouida stared at Solo, stricken. "I have prostrated myself at his feel—he wears size thirteen American shoes. He formerly bought his boots in London. What can I say of his appearance?"

Solo stared at the man's gray face. "Are you afraid to describe him? Why? Is he actually so terribly ugly—"

"Ahhh!" The word burst from Zouida's lips. "Please. He is a great man, of great goodness of heart, plagued by heinous problems. He rules his country wisely, compassionately. He has forty-seven wives, all of whom he took into slavery before he would marry them. Though each was enslaved, all would now die for him—all attest to his purity, and greatness of heart."

Solo laughed. "You sound like the Zabir chamber of commerce, or else you're so afraid these confidential reports will get somehow to your Sheik, and you're so afraid of telling us the truth about his looks that—"

"Please, Mr. Solo!" Zouida looked reedy to weep. "Is beauty everything? Or is beauty from the inside? If so, then Sheik Ali Zud is truly beautiful."

Solo laughed. "What you're saying is that Zud looks like a pig, but you're afraid to say it aloud. Relax, Zouida, he'll never hear what goes on in this room."

Zouida Berikeen was finally permitted to depart. When he was gone, Waverly sat chewing on his pipe, staring at Wanda's doll-like face.

Solo followed the direction of Waverly's thoughts and spoke urgently. "I suggest, sir, that we follow the alternate plan. That we allow me to handle this matter alone."

"That's what they want us to do," Waverly said.

"But, sir, we've hundreds of agents. In all parts of the world, none of them known to Sheik Zud—"

"Wonder what he looks like," Wanda said suddenly.

"Who?" Both Waverly and Solo twisted in their chairs, staring at her.

Realizing she had interrupted again, Wanda shrank into the huge chair, her eyes wide. She bit her lip.

But they stared at her, waiting. Finally, she knew she had to speak. "I wondered about Sheik Zud, sir. He sounded kind, even if he did order poor Illya executed. But it's so strange."

"Yes?" Waverly's voice was dangerously quiet.

"I mean, no pictures of the Sheik. No paintings or photos. The Sheik forbids it, on pain of death. Why would he do that?"

"I'm strongly tempted to send you over there with a camera to find out," Waverly told her.

She took him seriously. "Oh, please do, sir!"

Both Waverly and Solo stared at her, at each other, helplessly.

Finally, Waverly stood up, prowling the room, scratching at his jaw with the pipe stem. "I think we should send her. Now listen with all your mind, girl, and pray you do not misunderstand one word. I am sending you, by plane, tonight to Zabir."

"Oh, thank you!"

"Wait until you get back to thank me. Now you can look at Mr. Solo's disapproving face and see that he believes I am making my most serious tactical blunder of my career. But I ask myself, isn't this what Ambassador Zouida Berikeen would think, what Zud would think, what anyone in his

right mind would think? So, it seems I should send you. No one could suspect you are there for any purpose. They couldn't learn anything from you— because you don't know anything, do you?"

"Oh, no, sir!" Wanda agreed.

"Then listen carefully. Your life may depend on your following orders to the letter. Do you understand? Not only your life, but Mr. Solo's life, and the success of our whole plan to learn the truth about what's going on in that kingdom."

"Mr. Solo is going with me," Wanda whispered in delight.

"Correction!" Waverly said sternly. "Mr. Solo will fly on the same plane with you. He will go into Zabir with you, or soon after. But you do not know him. He is a stranger to you. You are not to speak to him. Do not contact him, no matter what happens. Do you understand? *No matter what happens*. Silence between you. No look that would betray either of you. You must not fail. You must obey my order Do not speak to Solo, even if you—or he—is in deadly peril."

"I promise," Wanda whispered. "

She folded her arms across her breasts, tautly, head tilted.

"Save your breath," Waverly advised. "Now, your sole job is to collect Illya's effects, his body if possible. That's all."

"I'll do it," Wanda cried. "I loved Illya—and this time, I won't fail. I'll do it just as you say. They can kill me, and I won't cry out to Mr. Solo."

"I hope so," Alexander Waverly said, but there wasn't much conviction in his tone. He was following a hunch, acting on instinct, but he somehow felt it was like trusting an aching corn to predict a hurricane.

FOUR

THE AIR FRANCE jet streaked south and east across the troubled European skies.

Napoleon Solo checked his disguise in the washroom mirror. It was simplicity itself, yet he was certain it was effective. Gray-tinted contact lenses had changed the color of his eyes. A graying wig added ten years to his age and the rimless glasses gave him the look of a kindly Mr. Chips on a school master's holiday.

He straightened and turned away to the door. The distant roar of the jet engines set a trembling through the fuselage. Hand on the knob, he hesitated. Much about this journey troubled him, but one thing really bugged him: how was Wanda Mae Kim going to react under fire?

His life, and his success in Zabir, depended on her following orders. He determined to test her at once.

He stepped out into the passageway, walking with the slightly stooped, hesitant movement of a middle-aged schoolteacher on what was likely his first plane flight.

He paused beside the chair where Wanda Mae sat with the latest issue of a movie fan magazine on her knees. She wore an exotic traveling suit of olive, her gleaming hair was done in a lacquered roll.

He gave her a faintly lecherous grin and said, "Hello, honey. May I sit here by you?"

Wanda's head jerked up and she gazed at him.

His heart sank. It was almost as if he could follow her thought processes. First, she hit the panic switch. He had the terrible premonition that she was going to warn him aloud that they were strangers, and not supposed to speak.

Then he was afraid that she didn't really recognize him. And then when her eyes widened, he saw she did.

He thought emptily, well, it's better for the whole foolish scheme to fall apart here in the plane rather than after they put down in Zabir.

But in these same swift seconds, he saw her recover. She found her lost poise, remembered her orders, and reacted like a soldier in the trenches.

"I'm sorry, sir!" she said loudly. "You've made some kind of mistake in the kind of girl you think I am If you persist in pushing your unwanted attentions on me, I'll have to call the steward!"

Solo retreated, almost stumbling, aware of the amused glances of the passengers near them.

Sighing in relief, Solo straightened, barely able to conceal his own pleased smile. He made a mental note to buy Wanda a steak dinner if they ever got back to New York.

When he turned toward his own seat, he saw that a young woman had moved into the chair beside his.

Solo caught his breath. To say she was a young woman was understatement. She was authentic, contemporary female perfection, thoughtfully designed. There was elegance about her, from trim slippers to upswept platinum hair. What she was was living proof that long flights don't have to be dull.

She smiled up at him. She wore a beige skirt which molded the planes of her hips and legs. She'd removed her matching jacket, although the pressurized cabin had seemed chilled to Solo until this moment.

Something in her wide hazel eyes challenged a man to take positive action.

Solo forgot his masquerade as a kindly Mr. Chips and swung into the chair beside her as if enroute to excitement.

"Frisky, aren't you?" she teased. Her voice carried built-in impact.

Napoleon Solo winced, remembering his graying wig, rimless glasses.

He smacked his lips, working his way to meet her gaze. "Fellow like me, miss, doesn't see a girl like you every day."

"Nobody does," she said casually. "Not every day."

"Ain't that the swinging truth," he agreed.

"Oh, you are a naughty old schoolteacher, aren't you?"

He appeared to blush timidly. "As my boys say in the fourth form. And speaking of forms, you're certainly in the first form, aren't you?" He cackled with laughter, peering over the top of his rimless glasses at her. "But how in this world did you ever know I was a school teacher?"

"It was just a guess." She laughed. "You didn't have much luck with the little China doll, did you?"

He gazed at his seat partner admiringly. "No, thank heavens, I didn't."

"Watch it, Mr. Chips. Your glasses are steaming up."

"Finch," he said. "My name. Armistead Finch."

She frowned. "Armistead Finch?"

"The third." He held out his band. She shook it limply and dropped it. "What's your name, my dear?"

"Pretty Wilde," she told him.

Solo emitted that cackling laugh again. "Oh, no, my dear. Your *name*."

She laughed at him. "Down, tiger. That is my name, Mr. Finch. At least it's my stage name. Pretty Wilde."

"Oh? You're on the stage?" he said, punching the rimless glasses up on his nose. "With fans, I'll bet."

"You are a naughty one, aren't you? I'll have to keep you in after classes, Mr. Finch. No, I was a model. I do interpretive dancing, ballet."

"What are you doing this far away from home, my dear?"

"I'm on my way to Zabir," she said.

Solo's expression did not alter; he kept that same fatuous smile. But he could not pretend surprise Somehow, when he had seen her occupying the chair beside his, he'd been certain he would hear that Zabir was her destination.

"I've been invited into Zabir by Sheik Zud himself," she said with pride. "You know he has forty- seven wives?"

"I never met him. No."

"Neither have I. But he is paying me fabulously to come to Omar— that's his capitol city—and teach etiquette, dress and dancing to his wives. Doesn't that sound exciting?

"I've heard that there's some internal trouble in Zabir," Solo said in his pedantic tone. "Border incidents. Aren't you frightened?"

Pretty Wilde put her lovely head back, laughing. "Why should I be? I've got the sheik himself protecting me."

"That's what I mean," Solo said.

She laughed even louder. He looked her over again, buying her story: it was plausible. Zud put his women in bondage before he married them; every one of his marriages had been forced upon the wife. Perhaps he would want them taught the niceties of manners and hospitality.

He shrugged. He had enough on his mind without worrying whether Pretty Wilde was less, or more, than met the eye.

"I beg your pardon there, you too!" The boisterous voice of the stocky man from across the aisle upped in between Solo and Pretty Wilde. "I couldn't

help noticing the way you two folks were laughing and enjoying yourselves. Pleasure to watch you folks."

He stood up, leaning upon the seat ahead of them, swaying slightly with the motion of the jet. He was in his thirties, Solo reckoned, heavy, with a round, balding head, thick brows and aggressive smile. He wore a plaid jacket and gray slacks.

He held out his card. "Ordwell Slybrough," he said. "Cadillac and Oldsmobile overseas. Middle East. On my way to Zabir." Solo tightened instinctively. Everybody was on his way to Zabir suddenly.

"Yes, sir," Slybrough went on. "Going to call on Sheik Zud himself. Tell you why. Hear the old fellow has forty-seven wives. I'll bet he looks older than he is!" He slapped his thigh, laughing. "Heard he drives nothing but Rolls Royces. Thought I might get him to change his brand for his favorite wives."

Slybrough roared with laughter again. "Sell forty-seven cars in one deal! How about that? Tidy little commission, huh? Go on, take my card."

Reluctantly, Napoleon Solo reached out and took the card. The instant his hand touched it, the card ignited, burst into flames, consumed.

Ordwell Slybrough almost fell down in the aisle laughing.

Solo dropped the flaming paper, lapping at it.

Ordwell hung on to the seat ahead of them, laughing. "Special treated paper. The friction caused by you taking it toward your face to read ignites it! Always good for a laugh."

Solo and Pretty Wilde glanced at each other, trying not to look annoyed.

Ordwell said loudly, "Come on to the lounge. Let me buy you a drink. Show no hard feelings." He reached over, got his briefcase and handed it to Pretty Wilde. "Open it up. Want to show you folks some cute pictures of my wife and kids."

Sighing to cover her impatience, Pretty said in irony, "You meet such interesting people on these long flights."

"That's the truth, honey!" Ordwell said. "Open it up."

Pretty Wilde unsnapped the briefcase lid. She cried out as the top flew up and a stuffed crocodile was catapulted upward into her face.

She caught the briefcase and stuffed animal up and threw them past Solo at the salesman.

This time Ordwell laughed so hard that he did topple over the arm of his chair. People were standing up to stare at them. Only Wanda remained rigid in her chair, staring straight ahead, Solo saw.

Ordwell laughed, panting for breath. He extended his arms.

"Help me up there, partner!" he gasped at Solo.

Solo stood up, but instead of taking the stout man's upraised arms, he lifted him by the armpits, holding him for a moment off the floor before he set him down.

"Take it easy, Pop," Ordwell said uncomfortably, but still smiling. "Just a laugh. No harm meant. Come on, let me buy you folks a drink."

Solo glanced questioningly at Pretty Wilde. The lovely young woman shrugged and stood up. They went aft to the small bar and the half-moon leather seat. As they sat down, Ordwell drew a cigar from his jacket pocket, offered Solo one.

Solo refused. Ordwell laughed. "Scared to trust me, eh? No, friend, I don't believe in trick cigars. Old stuff, huh?"

Solo shrugged, watching him put the flame of a gold cigarette lighter to the cigar, and slowly take one long pull at it.

Suddenly the cigar erupted, bursting in Ordwell's face, turning it black. But this was only the start. Small bright flares exploded like swarms of gnats.

Crying out, Ordwell hurled the cigar against the far wall and leaped to his feet.

He glared down at Solo, eyes distended in his soot-blackened face.

"You did that!" he bellowed, trembling with rage. "Put a pill of some kind in my cigar, didn't you? Wondered why you wouldn't just help me up, had to make a production out of it! Some joke! I ought to take a poke at you!"

"Sure," Solo said, grinning flatly. "Step outside—and wait for me."

Ordwell Slybrough stared down at him a moment, then turned on his heel and strode away, shouting back at all the plane passengers and personnel, who were applauding Napoleon Solo.

ACT II

INCIDENT OF THE DOUBLE AGENT

"GOOD EVENING. This is your steward. As you perceive, the no-smoking light is on, as is the warning to fasten your seat belts, please. We are coming into the International Airport of Kurbot, on the border of Zabir. Our passengers for Zabir will disembark here. Others continuing with us to Xanra and Iran will remain aboard. Please keep seat belts fastened until the plane is on the runway before the debarking center and all engines are off. We have enjoyed serving you, and—"

Napoleon Solo exhaled heavily, stealing a quick glance toward Wanda. She sat erect, businesslike. For no good reason, he felt a rush of sorrow for her. She seemed so small. On the other hand, this was a career she'd chosen for herself. Death remained a constant risk. Well, she'd passed her first tests. He hoped she'd pass the others.

His jaw tightened. He couldn't worry about her. Finding out the truth about Illya's death and the unrest inside Zabir would be a full-time operation,

requiring all his attention. He would only endanger both of them, and the whole objective, unless he put her entirely out of his mind

He could not help glancing toward her after she came off the wind-tortured steps, holding her pert little hat with one hand and her brief skirt with the other as she crossed the runway toward the waiting rooms. With her diplomatic pass from United Network she was spared the long struggle through customs.

As schoolmaster-on-a-holiday Armistead Finch, Solo was completely entangled in custom's red-tape.

He heard Pretty Wilde complaining to officials behind her about the delays.

"I've been brought here by Sheik Zud himself," she kept telling them in outraged tones.

All she got from them were shrugs and repeated, "Sorry, no English, thank you."

He glanced around, but saw the practical joking salesman nowhere. He shrugged, grinning faintly at the memory of that exploding cigar, Ordwell's stalking away in frustrated rage.

Finally, Solo worked his way to the main concourse exit. Pretty Wilde's voice snagged at him. "Good-bye Professor. Hope you have a nice vacation and catch a lot of pretty girls."

He nodded, peering over the tops of his rimless glasses at her. "Same to you, Pretty. Hope you have no trouble at all teaching the sultan's forty-seven wives a thing or two."

"Want me to put in a good word for you with the sheik?" Pretty asked.

He managed to play the school teacher to the end, smiling. "Pretty, I can't think of a thing that sheik could do for me." He let his gaze admire her openly. "He just isn't my type."

Pretty laughed. "Though he might have some slightly-used wives lying around—"

He said, smacking his lips, "You've ruined all other women for me."

He watched her progress along the concourse, aware that this was a chore he shared with all males in the place, even the oldest, hunkered in their burnooses. She lighted the tiredest eyes, speaking a language understood by every man she passed.

He watched her step aside suddenly, and his gaze pulled unwillingly from her to the long column of green-clad soldiers sharp-stepping in columns of fours. They carried field packs, wore helmet-liners, carried gleaming new rifles, bayonets fixed. They looked combat ready, except that boots and uniforms appeared catalogue fresh.

He jerked his gaze back, but Pretty Wilde had disappeared. She was gone as though she'd never existed except as a figment of an overheated imagination.

It suddenly occurred to him that he bad no idea what had happened to Wanda.

The public address speakers crackled, words spewing forth in Arabic. People reacted, fast, leaping up from the chairs and from the floors, grabbing up suitcases, carpetbags and sheet-wrapped belongings. They ran toward the exits, and the green-clad soldiers, at a command from a shrill whistle, spread out, barring every door, guns rigid across their chests.

Shaking his head, Solo retreated to the Air France counter and asked in French what was happening?

The young woman on duty smiled at his halting use of her language, answered in careful English, like something remembered: "The troops are in charge. Zabir borders have been closed, sir, until further notice."

Then she shrugged helplessly. "This is all we know, sir."

Solo thanked her, remembering to walk in that hesitant school master manner, shoulders slightly forward as if he were writing on an invisible blackboard.

The Arabic chattering suddenly ceased on the public address system. A voice, speaking in English, intoned: "Miss Wanda Mae Kim, please. Miss Wanda Mae Kim, passenger on Air France Flight seven twenty seven, report-to the upper lounge at once, please. Miss Kim."

And then the Arabic spewing of commands took over again.

Solo continued his unhurried pace, kept the questioning smile, but moved to the stairs and went up them to the lounge.

At the head of the wide stairs, Solo paused as if out of breath and leaned against the balustrade.

He had to hide his shock at seeing Ambassador Zouida Berikeen standing near the most modern baggage lift. He was not alone. Three or four Zabir civilians, who were obviously Zouida's secretaries and flunkies, stood alertly near him. Behind him were a dozen green- clad soldiers.

Solo exhaled, seeing what the soldiers were guarding. There was a casket, sealed tightly, and upon it were neatly stacked the clothing and effects belonging to Illya Kuryakin.

Near this casket was another, also stacked with feminine apparel and accessories, obviously the belongings of Ann Nelson Wheat, the evangelist who'd been executed as a spy.

Solo felt the muscles tighten in his stomach: Zouida was less than a hundred feet from him. He even saw the ambassador glance in his direction once.

Solo turned and faltered to the coffee bar, where he ordered a demitasse of the strong coffee. It was served with liquid sweetener and goat's milk. He almost gagged on the first sip.

He sweated, wondering if Zouida would recognize him despite his wig, glasses and contact lenses. No one's eyes ever changed, he knew. Perhaps glasses and contact lenses and an excellently constructed gray wig, plus the fact that Zouida thought him in New York, might deceive the ambassador, but he wouldn't gamble on it.

He winced. Whatever the trouble here in Zabir, it had been enough to cause the immediate and secret recall of the United Nations representative.

He lifted the cup, but didn't take another sip of the coffee.

Wanda came hurrying up the stairs. She almost glanced at him, then turned away.

He shook his head helplessly. He'd wondered where Wanda had disappeared to. Now he knew. She'd gone to the powder room and completely redone her hair and her make-up. While the second-most important man in Zabir waited!

He heard her heels clatter across the tile flooring to where Ambassador Zouida Berikeen awaited her, with his presentation ceremony prepared.

Solo could not hear what they said. It was like watching a stilted tableau. Finally, Wanda bowed to the ambassador, smiled uncertainly at his aides and guards and stepped forward to examine the belongings stacked on Illya's casket.

She turned and said something to Zouida, evidently asking if she would be permitted to open the casket to view the body.

Zouida stepped forward, shaking his head. No, to view the body would not be permitted.

Wanda accepted this, then began to go through the clothing and other belongings spread before her.

Suddenly Wanda cried out. Napoleon Solo stiffened.

Zouida stepped back, startled. The secretaries straightened and the twelve soldiers came to attention, bayonets glittering at the ready.

Wanda squealed again and waved something in her hand above her head.

Solo set the coffee cup down, afraid he would drop it.

Mouth sagging open, he stared across the lounge toward where Wanda stood, crying out frantically.

Sick, Solo saw her heel around, still waving the square card above her head.

The ambassador put his hand on her arm, but she shook it away. She broke free of the knot of people around the caskets and ran across the room toward him.

Swallowing the bile that gagged him, Solo shook his head at her. But she was like an unruly puppy, frenzied with delight, and nothing was going to stop her. Except a bullet, Solo thought in anguish.

"Solo!" she screamed. "Mister Solo! Look what I've got!"

"Young lady!" Solo said sharply. "I don't know you! I don't want to know you! Get away from me! What are you talking about?"

Everyone on the mezzanine stared at them, Solo saw. He sweated, shaking his head at Wanda.

Her mind could encompass only her joy. She could not think of any thing except the triumph she felt at finding the plastic card among Illya's effects.

"It's his Old-Timer Key Club card!" she cried exultantly.

"Don't know what you're talking about!" Solo protested, retreating.

She followed, shaking the plastic card in front of his face. "The X across it, Mr. Solo! Illya made that. It's our code, don't you remember?"

"I remember!" Solo said under his breath, in raging agony.

"But Mr. Solo! This means Illya is alive! He's alive!"

"Well, you may have fixed that— for all of us!" Solo told her coldly, discarding any attempt to go on with his disguise. Through a red cloud of rage, he saw Zouida and his retinue bearing down on them.

Wanda sagged, finally realizing what she had done. She'd broken silence, betrayed him.

She gasped out in anguish. "But he's alive! I didn't think it mattered after we found he was alive."

He gazed at her. "Finding Illya alive was part of it, Wanda. I could have done that without you. The rest of it was finding out what they wanted, what's behind this plot. But that doesn't matter now."

Wanda sagged against the coffee bar, weeping.

Solo didn't even look at her. He set himself to receive his old friend Zouida in a disguise he had hoped would deceive him.

He wondered what he would find to say that Zouida would accept?

He didn't have to find out, because in a thunder of heavy boots and rattle of weaponry six green-clad soldiers and three black-suited civilians strode off the stairs and surrounded Wanda and Solo before Zouida reached them.

Solo recognized the man in the lead even before the head of Zabir's secret police introduced himself. Kiell was as Zouida had described him, stocky of body, balding, with a high forehead, a ring of thick black curly hair and a walrus moustache.

The thing about Kiell that attracted Solo's especial notice was the thickness of his neck, so that his shirt collar bulged out of shape.

"I am Kiell," the stocky man announced. "Director of Zabir security. Lord protector of His Highness, the King of Lions, the Sultan of the deserts, Sheik Ali Zud of Zabir. In his name, I arrest you as unregistered enemy aliens."

Solo merely nodded, knowing that after Wanda's performance there was nothing he could say. She sagged against him, chewing at her underlip.

"Wait a minute!" From beyond the ring of Kiell's soldier guard, Solo heard Zouida calling. "Kiell, let me talk to you!"

Kiell straightened. His voice lashed out. "Piebr! Frun!" The two black-suited secret police snapped to attention, drawing guns from shoulder holsters. The two detectives were much younger than Kiell—in their early twenties, slender, dark.

Piebr and Frun pushed back, making a double line of the soldiers, three on each side. The twelve casket guards stopped, standing at attention when Kiell barked commands at them in Arabic.

Piebr and Frun stood with hand guns against their chests, staring straight ahead, making a path from Ambassador Zouida in to where Kiell waited, unbending.

Frowning, Zouida walked slowly, staring at Kiell and shaking his head. When he reached the place where the two younger detectives stood, Zouida paused, looking at one of them in anguish. He whispered, "Piebr—"

The young detective merely straightened his shoulders, stood more rigidly, staring across the top of the older man's head.

Zouida exhaled audibly, his body sagging.

Kiell spoke in English, his lips oddly immobile, as if he hated the words he was forced to speak. "If you would discuss your betrayal of our lord the king, speak to me! Piebr has nothing to say to a traitor!"

"Traitor?" Zouida quivered visibly. H shook his head, tears brimming his anguished eyes. "I am no traitor. My whole soul belongs to my king and my country."

"Your lies won't do you any good now, old goat," Kiell said between taut lips.

Zouida stared at Kiell for a long time, then finally shrugged, as if admitting to himself that there was no realism in appealing for mercy from Kiell. It was like asking water from the desert sands.

He drew a deep breath and turned to face Solo.

"I am sorry, my old friend." he said. "I am sorry about all of this. But I can only say to you, I have been double-crossed, too."

"Enough!" Kiell said in cold rage. He drew a gun from his shoulder holster, thrust it close to Zouida's solar plexus and pressed the trigger.

The report of the handgun was muffled by Zouida's clothing and his body. The ambassador was driven backward by the impact of the bullet. He staggered, toppled against Piebr. The young detective chewed on his mouth, staring straight ahead.

Slowly Zouida crumpled to the floor at the feet of Piebr and the green-clad soldiers. He whispered. "May Allah—have mercy on my poor—poor country."

He sagged heavily then, a rattle working up through his throat, and he was dead.

Kiell gave the dead man the merest glance. He turned the gun on Wanda and Solo. Wanda cried out involuntarily.

Kiell spoke coldly. "If the two of you do not wish to join that traitor, you will come quietly."

Kiell jerked his head. The six soldiers moved in prodding Wanda and Solo toward the stairs.

Kiell strode to the center of the mezzanine. He gestured toward the slain ambassador.

"A traitor to our country has been slain!" he shouted. "Slain in the name of King Zud! Long live Zud!"

"Long live Zud!" the soldiers shouted in reply. The guards on the floor below took up the cry and it rattled against the high-domed ceiling. "Long live Zud!"

TWO

ILLYA KURYAKIN worked swiftly, plaiting a yard-long rope. The strips of cloth he used came from the lower hem of the filthy burnoose he wore. All other clothing had been stripped away from him. He was barefooted; he no longer had even a watch.

He supposed time wasn't too urgent here in the dungeon under Sheik Zud's castle. Still, he hoped by now that Solo had been sent to collect his belongings. Zud had told him that Solo had been sent for. What Zud didn't know was about the X mark on the face of the Key Club card, the code which said to an alert agent like Solo, *I'm alive. Danger. Proceed with caution.*

Zud had been throwing nothing but curves at him since his arrival in Zabir a month ago. He had come here as a technical adviser to Zud's spy system.

And he'd ended up here in this dank cell.

Illya's blue eyes darkened. He ran his hand through his Slavic corn-colored hair.

He straightened, hearing sporadic gunfire from the streets outside the castle. Zud had plenty of woes at home. What was this deal of holding him and trying to lure Solo into the same trap?

The guard drew his bayonet across the bars. Illya looked up, dropping the rope into his lap. The guard, about Illya's age, wore a sweated green uniform, hat back on his head. He'd spent two years at England's Sandhurst, but now was in bad with Zud and detailed to guard the political prisoners.

"Aly David," Illya said, "what time do you go off duty?"

The guard laughed. "Why? Do you want to go out on the town with me?"

Illya forced a smile, but thought coldly that Aly David would be astonished to learn he meant to escape. He would use this cloth rope he was plaiting as a garrote. He would be forced to strangle a guard in order to get out of this cell. He'd grown fond of Aly David; there were many of the others he'd use the garrote upon without reluctance. Brutal, sadistic animals they had proved to be.

Illya said, "I wouldn't go out on the town in these rags." He looked down at the ill-fitted burnoose. "The last prisoner who wore this thing was not only bigger than I am, he had lice."

Aly David laughed. "The lice give you something to take your mind off your troubles. I've grown quite fond of mine."

"Why don't you break out of this country? You're as much its prisoner as I am."

"Except that it is my country. And I love it," Aly David said. "Relax. They won't be using gun butts on you for another four hours. I am your guard until after recall from worship." He laughed. "And you'd better remember to sleep with your feet some other direction than toward the east—and Allah. Next time they might kill you for that slight indiscretion."

Illya exhaled and relaxed against the wall, resigned to waiting until after prayers to attempt his escape.

THREE

A ROLLS ROYCE was parked, engine idling, outside the airport terminal. A stolid-faced chauffeur stood at attention with both front and rear curb side doors held open.

Wanda and Solo marched out at the head of the convoy of Kiell, two detectives and six armed soldiers.

The soldiers double-timed out, lining up at front and rear of the Rolls Royce, guns held across their chests, ready, facing the darkness.

Solo saw a sign which read, "OMAR, 45 kilos." Beyond he saw small buildings, vague lights, and then what appeared to be eternal wasteland, rugged and lifeless, cruel looking even in the softening dark.

Kiell ordered Wanda into the front seat. Then he said to Solo. "One moment, Mr. Solo. I am sick looking at this disguise."

Solo scowled, thinking that Kiell had gotten sick of it quickly, unless he'd seen pictures of the real Solo somewhere.

Solo paused beside the car. Kiell caught the wig, jerked it from Solo's head, along with the rimless glasses. He threw them to the cement at his feet.

"In the back," he said. "Let's move!"

Solo sat in the back seat between Piebr and Frun. Frun made a slight whistling noise between his teeth, but Piebr stared straight ahead, lost in thought. Both held guns ready in their lap.

In the front seat Wanda sat disconsolately between Kiell and the chauffeur.

The chauffeur drove the car out to the wide four-laned highway, anachronistically modern, hewn from this ancient earth. He held the speedometer at sixty. Nobody spoke.

Solo stared at the back of Kiell's head, at the way his shirt collar bulged around his neck. It was strange, as if the man had a tube of flesh growing like a welt.

Solo's heart slugged faster as he stared at that shirt collar. He remembered how he had reacted when Kiell spoke of his own disguise, puzzled.

He held his breath, gazing at that bulging collar. Suppose that bulge was not caused by flesh, but by the rolled ends of a plastic mask?

He felt the sweat break out at his hair line, across his forehead. If that question weren't far-out enough, how about another one? Suppose that was not really Kiell? Suppose it was a man wearing a plastic mask, impersonating Zabir's chief of secret police?

Solo loosened the button of his jacket. Piebr and Frun reacted like robots, placing guns at his temples.

Kiell turned uncomfortably, laughed between taut lips. "Don't think you can get away with any thing, Mr. Solo. My men are trained to kill."

"I know," Solo said. "But once they're trained to kill, they never make good pets again, do they?"

Thick silence settled in the car again. Solo went on sweating. They whipped past a sign reading "OMAR 35 kilometers." Time was running out. He could not quite believe an impostor could fool the country's ambassador, or these two trained officers..

But could they not be in on the plot? But if they were impostors, would Zouida have recognized them? He'd called one of them by name. Still, he could have been fooled by Kiell, who hurled charges of highest treason at him. And Kiell had killed him on the spot. No trial, no extenuating circumstances, no second chance—nothing.

Solo pushed his hand in his jacket pocket. Both Piebr and Frun reacted. Again gun barrels pressed at Solo's temples. He withdrew a small plastic bag of bright candy wafers.

The police relaxed.

Kiell snarled at him, "Sit still, or die now!"

Solo offered the wafers to Piebr and Frun. They refused, contempt showing in their faces that he'd think them so stupid. He shrugged and plopped two in his mouth.

When he leaned forward to the front seat, Piebr and Frun leaned with him. He offered candy to Kiell who told him to sit back. The chauffeur only shook his head.

Solo said, "Have a couple wafers, Wanda. It'll take your mind off your woes."

She shook her head refusing. His sharply spoken, "Wanda! Candy!" made her sit up, nodding.

Hand trembling, she took two wafers, tossed them in her mouth.

Solo relaxed, crushed the plastic bag in his fist, dropped it on the floor. He sat back, fingering his tie.

At the moment he felt both Frun and Piebr relax on each side of him, he jerked off his tie clasp and tossed it over into the front seat.

Both Piebr and Frun lunged at him, guns up. He caught them; using their own momentum, he smashed their heads together.

Kiell turned, bringing his own gun up as the explosion in the front of the car stopped him, stunned by shock.

The gas spread instantaneously carried on the currents of air conditioning. The windows fogged with it. Everything was blotted out. Kiell gagged, gulping for breath. The chauffeur lost control of the wheel.

The big car hurtled to the right off the highway, going down the rough shoulders, and bounding crazily up the far incline before it finally stalled.

Solo was already opening the rear door of the car.

Gasping for breath, but unaffected by the nerve gas that had overcome the others, Wanda twisted around on the front seat.

Solo grabbed her under the arms, dragged her over the seat and out of the rear door. Once they were outside the car, he shoved her away from him.

She sprawled face down in the sand.

Solo didn't even glance her way. He dragged Piebr and Frun from the back seat, then pulled the driver and Kiell from the front, leaving the doors wide so the car could air out.

Wanda pulled herself to her feet, watching him, her mouth quivering.

Solo glanced at her.

"Get their guns," he ordered. "All their guns. Quick. And don't forget the chauffeur!"

He took a small needle from the inner lapel of his jacket and a plastic vial from his pocket. He inserted the needle into the vial until the liquid dripped from it. Then he scratched into the vein near the base of Kiell's throat.

He tossed the vial and needle from him then and concentrated on the tight-fitting mask. He rolled it carefully up across the face and head of the unconscious man.

When he had peeled the mask away, he stared down into the face of Ordwell Slybrough, the practical joker from the plane.

"Who do you think he really is?" Wanda said breathlessly. "I know he isn't a car salesman."

"He's a THRUSH agent. And Zouida's poor country has a lot more woes than even poor Zouida suspected."

Solo chose the best of the guns Wanda had collected. He pushed it under his belt. Then he stashed the others in the glove compartment on the Rolls dash.

Wanda watched him silently, a look of awe firing her black eyes.

He took all identification papers from the double agent's pockets. Ordwell had regained conscious ness, but he could neither move nor speak.

He stared at Napoleon Solo, hatred burning in his eyes.

"Have a cigar, old pal." Solo said and shoved one between the double agent's lips. It hung there. Don't worry, the injection I gave you will have no side effects. It'll just keep you quiet, and your voice turned off for a few hours."

Solo placed the papers he'd carried for Armistead Finch into Ordwell's pockets. Then with slow, painstaking care and the use of a mirror he worked the plastic mask down over his own head. He placed the Kiell identification papers in his jacket pocket.

Ordwell tried to speak, failed, shadows swirling deep in his eyes. Wanda stared at Solo in the mask, lips parted.

Solo pulled the three men into the rear of the car, tossed Ordwell in upon them. He closed the doors, reversed the Rolls to the highway.

"Get in under the wheel," Solo told Wan "And keep driving, no matter what happens. Follow orders this time."

"I'm so sorry about the candy. I realize now you were inoculating me against the effects of the gas."

"I was a fool," Solo said. "I'll hate myself for it."

"You'll never regret it," Wanda said. "I'm going to be a good agent for you."

"You should live so long." Solo sat turned on the front seat, gun in hand resting on the back, fixed on the three men in the back of the car.

"All right," he snapped at Wanda. "Saddle up! Move out!"

Her voice was small, panic- stricken. "Please, boss. There is just one little thing."

Solo managed to refrain from swearing. "Yes. What is it?"

"Please, boss. How do you shift the gears on a car like this?"

FOUR

THE GROTESQUE yellow fingers flicking out from a single large candle fought feebly against the dark of the prison cell.

Illya Kuryakin stood up, testing the plaited rope by jerking it sharply between his fists. It wouldn't snub down an elephant, but it would do.

He listened. The firing had ceased in the streets during the prayer hour. Afterwards, they fought again, almost to the palace gates.

He sat in the darkness, waited for the end of prayer time, for the changing of the guards.

Now, the moment of truth.

He rolled up his straw mattress to resemble a human body and placed it in the darkest corner of the cell. He grinned, knowing the guard could not bring his lantern inside a night cell. He needed to keep both arms free to protect himself.

When the mattress was lined up to suit him, he inched across the cell to the opposite cave-dark corner. From here, he uttered a cry, pleased that it sounded as if it came from the straw mattress!

He sighed in relief because ventriloquism was an art that demanded faithful practice, and he admitted he'd grown rusty.

He wound the ropes over each hand, leaving a loop between. Then, crouched there, he moaned again, and again, until at last a guard came grumbling to the cell bars.

"What's the matter in there?"

"I'm sick," Illya whined, his voice coming from the pile of straw.

"You'll be sick, you don't stop that whining."

"I think I'm dying!"

The guard hesitated. "You better not die. Come here to the bars—let me look at you."

"I can't! I'm too ill."

"Listen to me! You come here. Sheik Zud ordered us not to kill you. But don't push me too far."

"If you don't kill me, you can't keep me here," Illya said in that weak voice.

"I can make you wish you were dead," the guard told him.

Illya's voice lowered. "Yes. There's always that. Isn't there?"

"You think about that, and you keep quiet in there."

"Zud will have your head when he finds I died while you were on guard."

There was a long silence. Finally Illya Kuryakin heard the key thrust into the iron lock, the door whine on its hinges as it was opened.

Illya held his breath, crouching in the corner, watching.

The guard moved cautiously across the dark cell. A wan splinter of light lay on the floor in a line from the high, inset window.

The guard moved across the spray of moonlight, gun upraised. "Where are you?"

"Here. I'm so sick." Illya tossed his voice into the rolled straw mattress.

"Get up. Let me look at you."

"I can't. I think my appendix has ruptured."

Suddenly he heard the guard cry out, and he went tense.

"Infidel!" the guard shouted. "Again you sleep with your infidel feet toward Allah!"

He lifted the gun and brought it butt down on the straw mattress.

Illya lunged upward, flinging himself across the darkness.

At that instant, the guard realized he'd been fooled. He straightened, trying to turn.

He was too late. The garrote was clamped about his throat, and Illya thrust his fists past each other with all his strength, pulling it tight.

The gun clattered to the stone floor. The guard followed it, like a toppling tree. He sank to his knees and fell over to his side.

Illya waited no longer. He grabbed up the gun, ran through the door. He closed the cell, locking it. He threw the keys into an empty cell, ran.

He almost ran into another guard at the first turn of the cell block.

The heavy tread of the soldier warned him.

Very slowly, barefooted, Illya inched his way to the corner, peered around it.

The prisoners in the cell block shouted, aware that one of them had broken loose.

Illya saw the guard come alert, shift his gun ready. He pressed back against the wall.

As the guard came racing around the corner, Illya stuck out the butt of his gun. The soldier tripped on it and went sprawling forward on his face.

His gun clattered far out of his reach ahead of him. He shook himself and came up on his knees, trying to turn around.

"I wish I didn't hate violence so," Illya said, clobbering him with his gun butt.

The prisoners in the cells were hysterical now. They ran to the bars, chanting, hooting, yelling, scraping tin cups on the iron bars.

In the distance Illya Kuryakin heard the booted guard detail alerted, running toward the cell-block.

He glanced around at the wailing prisoners.

'Thanks a whole bunch, fellows," he said in sarcasm.

He stood in the middle of the corridor, gazing around helplessly.

A voice shouted at him from a cell. "Mister! Through that narrow passage. It leads to the kitchen, the garbage. There is only one guard there. Hurry. And Allah go with you!"

Illya didn't waste time in thanks. As the first wave of the guard detail clattered off the wide stone steps and into the corridor, he slipped into the dark passage.

He ran along it. The inmate had not lied about the garbage at least. The sick-sweet smell of it almost suffocated him.

He saw the door at the top of a small stairs. He raced up it.

He heard boots behind him in the darkness. The opening door would silhouette him in light. Yet he could not hurry. He had to know where that guard was out there.

Just slitting the door, Illya peered out. A rifle was fired from behind him. The bullet splintered the door inches from his head. This made the decision for him. He thrust the door wide and lunged through it.

The guard on duty was entangled with a scullery maid in the deepest shadows.

He wheeled around, grabbing for his gun. Illya swung the barrel of his gun, stunning the soldier. The maid screamed, her mouth wide. And screamed again until the garden rang with her screaming.

Illya gazed around in panic. There was the kitchen garden and beyond it a gate in the four-foot wall. The gate stood open. Beyond it lay freedom. All he had to do was make it across that garden.

The maid screamed louder, hysterical. He heard the heavy-booted soldiers approaching in the narrow passage. Lights flared on in the lower windows of the palace. Suddenly, police dogs yowled near by, and a siren screeched frantically from a minaret.

Illya sprinted across the garden. The soldiers had reached the door and thrust it open, but he had made the gate. He grabbed the heavy wooden gate and swung it closed behind him. It slammed into place, locking.

Illya whirled around, ready to run.

He almost plowed into a soldier, standing ready, gun fixed on him, bayonet gleaming in the darkness.

Illya stopped instantly. He straightened, feeling rage and frustration that he'd failed after all this.

"Hold!" the soldier ordered.

Illya's heart leaped. He recognized the voice. It was Aly David, off-duty, on his way to the bar racks.

"Aly David!" he said. "Don't shoot, it's me! Illya Kuryakin. We're friends. I waited, so you wouldn't have to be hurt when I broke out. Let me go! It's me, Aly David. Illya!"

"I know who it is," Aly David said. "You're a fine fellow, and I like you. My country hasn't treated me fairly, and you have. Still it is my country. And you are my prisoner. If you do not drop that gun and return quietly to your cell, I'll have to kill you."

* * *

THE HIGHWAY was lonely, empty, untraveled.

Solo, watching the headlamps bore holes in the desert darkness, wondered how many dozen automobiles in the entire country of Zabir used this sleek modern highway?

He held the gun ready, fixed on his prisoners stacked in the tonneau of the big car. He saw one of the younger detectives stir.

He glanced at a sign post: "OMAR 25 kilometers."

He spoke to Wanda, who clutched the wheel with both hands, her whole body tense in concentration. "This is far enough. Stop here."

Wanda removed her foot from the accelerator, allowing the Rolls to glide to a stop on the rocky high way shoulder.

Solo told her, "You keep your mouth shut. No matter what happens."

Wanda drew a deep breath. "You can trust me, boss, from now on. I'll die before I betray you."

"Promises. Promises," Solo said, getting out of the car. He opened the rear door. First, he propped the stocky Ordwell up on the back seat, secured with handcuffs he found among the detective's gear.

"You won't need these," he said amiably to the double agent, "but it will look better."

He helped the struggling Piebr from the car. The young detective staggered, drawing his hand across his eyes. His dark face was gray from the lingering effects of the gas.

"What happened?" he asked, staring into the plastic mask, and evidently accepting Solo as his superior.

Solo jerked his Kiell-appearing head toward the handcuffed double agent. "This man tried to kill us all with a small nerve-gas bomb. I managed to overcome him."

Piebr recovered slowly, his wits sharpening. He scowled, staring at Ordwell's ruddy face. "But he's not the same man at all!"

"Of course not!" Solo snapped. "After I had overpowered him, I realized something was wrong. This man was wearing a plastic mask."

He heard Wanda's sharp intake of breath, but didn't glance her way.

"When I ripped the mask away," Solo said, "I finally got down to his real face—though it's nothing to boast about, eh?"

Piebr grinned weakly. "You are very clever, Chief."

"That's why I am your superior," Solo said in an arrogant tone. "Help your partner to his feet, and the driver. Get them out in the fresh air. Everything is under control now, and we'll be able to deliver this infidel Napoleon Solo —" he inclined his masked head toward Ordwell—"to the King of the Lions."

"Zud will be eternally indebted, Chief," Piebr said. He aided the two men from the car.

"Exactly," Solo said with just the correct inflection of arrogance. "Perhaps now he will listen to our suggestions for his own safety."

"I hope so, Brilliant One," Piebr said humbly.

The masked Solo glanced toward Wanda and said directly toward her, "Too bad our enemies do not train their subordinates to have such loyalty to their superiors."

He saw Wanda wince.

When Frun and the driver had been sufficiently revived by the night air, Solo said in a sharp tone:

"Now, let's waste no more time." He faced the driver. "Get us to the palace at once."

"Yes, sire." The driver bowed low.

Solo looked at Frun and Piebr. "Guard this young woman. Keep her alive. I'll want to question her. Of course she's working with Napoleon Solo there."

Wanda's mouth sagged open.

Piebr spoke hesitantly. "Sire, our guns. They're gone."

"Of course they are," Solo said, voice rasping. "I wanted to demonstrate to you what can happen to you if you let down your vigil for one moment." He got the guns from the glove compartment, returned them to the three men.

Wanda's gasp was audible now, and when he looked at her, her astonished mouth gaped wide.

"And you, close your mouth, young woman!" he ordered. "Flies are very bad in this country."

ACT III

INCIDENT OF THE CATALYTIC AGENT

THE ROLLS ROYCE droned soothingly upon the slick highway, racing in the desert night. The closer they came to the capital City of Omar, the tighter Napoleon Solo found himself wound. On the front seat between him and the driver, Wanda was fighting increasing hysteria. He felt her leg pressed savagely against his, as if she hoped some of his courage might rub off on her.

In the dune-scalloped distance ahead, they saw the saffron glow of Omar's lights.

Suddenly, in an oasis as lush as a rainforest, the tall spires and minarets of the sheik's palace loomed against the star-laced heavens.

The driver dimmed his lights twice, and the wrought-iron gates, fifteen feet tall in a thick block-stone wall, swung back. The driver raced through without slowing. As they sped along the curving drive to the brilliantly illuminated chateau, Solo saw lines of green-garbed soldiers on guard, bayonets fixed.

Getting in was easy, he thought. The trick was in getting out.

Before the driver braked the Rolls before the wide, curving, forty marble steps leading upward to the columned portico at the palace entrance, a battalion of bowing servants had raced out. They spread themselves, fanlike down the steps, awaiting any commands of the illustrious arrivals.

Solo had to remind himself that all this display of humility was in his honor —as Kiell, head of Zabir's security, protector of Zud.

A servant raced forward, opening Solo's door first and prostrating himself on the marble as Solo stepped from the car.

Solo gave the servant no more than a glance; without even looking back, strode up the steps.

He wasn't sure where he was going, but he knew that asking questions now would be fatal.

He saw a head-servant, standing illumined in jewel-like lights from the opened doors at the head of the steps. The man stood ramrod straight until Solo came off the top step. Then the servant sank to his knees and kissed the ground at his feet.

From his prone position the servant intoned in portentous voice, "Sheik Zud requests that you meet with him and his ministers in the council room,

Master."

Solo nodded, hearing Wanda and the others coming up the marble steps behind, him.

He turned and glanced at them. Frun and the driver supported the handcuffed Ordwell between them. Piebr followed, his hand on Wanda's elbow.

Wanda looked ready to crumple. Solo waited until his subordinates and prisoners were grouped behind him. Then he said, "We will all go to the council room, where we will deliver these infidel traitors to our great Zud."

He spoke to the servant: "Lead us to the council room."

Solo strode through the jewel-decked doors in the wake of the head-servant. He walked alone through the high portals of silver into a spacious, incredible lobby, twice again as large as the gleaming concourse in the elegant new air terminal at Kurbot. He could almost hear the soft echoing of his own bated breathing in this high-domed hall.

Solo managed to walk with his head straight, restraining his wish to stare in amazement at silk tapestries, deep damasks, and precious stone inlays. The floor glittered in its golden pattern of bright mosaics. Each inch of the place shone with polish, reflecting the myriad of lights, although no light fixtures were visible; everything was done indirectly or by reflection.

The servant preceded Solo up a staircase whose balustrade glittered with opulent jewelry

At the head of these stairs, five wide corridors led outward into the wings of the palace. The servant chose his course and Solo followed him.

The long corridor was covered by a domed ceiling and its open places boasted silver-barred banisters.

The laughter of children swept up to Solo. He glanced across the banister into a suite where innumerable children played, laughing.

He decided even the head of the secret police would be permitted a look. He walked to the balustrade and stared down at King Zud's offspring. He had never seen happier children. They were completely unaware of the strife outside the palace walls.

He turned, waving his hand. The head-servant moved out again. They walked for some moments, passed closed doors, before they came out again to an opening. A quick glance told him this was the court of the wives. He did not pause, because he reckoned instinctively that not even Zud's protector would be permitted to look down on Zud's wives taking their ease.

The chatter of the women followed him. He recalled that Zouida had insisted that Zud's wives—all them his former slaves—were happy and contented and worshiped their shared husband.

The servant led them through smother corridor, which ended finally at a thick cedar door with iron trim. The servant touched a bell and instantly servants inside the council room swung the door open for them.

Napoleon Solo strode in. He was less bold than he appeared.

He slowed involuntarily, seeing a conference room fifty feet across and eighty feet long. A gleaming table surrounded by high-backed leather chairs dominated the place. Except for the jewel-crusted throne at the head of the conference table, the chamber might have been the inner sanctum of some industrial complex.

He sighed, seeing that the throne was empty. At least Zud was not yet here. Along each side of the table were twelve dark men, the sheik's ministers. Solo saw an empty chair at the right of the throne; instinctively he knew this was the seat of the recently slain Zouida Berikeen.

Directly across from the empty chair was another waiting place and Solo went around to it without hesitation. The ministers bowed to him, and he saw he'd passed another test.

He spoke to Piebr. "The driver will go with the servants. You, Piebr and Frun, will guard my prisoners. Put them on their knees against the wall

there for our king's inspection. On their knees. And don't let them speak while Sheik Zud is in this room. They must not speak, no matter what happens."

Piebr nodded, proud to be associated with the protector of Zud. "As you order, Master."

Solo dropped into his chair, as if he owned at least an interest in the corporation. He did not even bother to glance to see how his orders were being executed.

He did, after he was seated, glance once toward Wanda. She watched him, mouth parted, half in awe, half in terror for them both. Her look expressed precisely his own inner panic, he thought wryly.

Suddenly ceiling-high golden doors beyond the throne were opened and Sheik Zud strode through.

The twelve ministers leaped 'to their feet and then prostrated their heads on the table.

Solo followed their example, but could not resist turning his head slightly.

Sheik Zud came from a suite even more brilliantly illuminated than this council chamber. Ahead of him, on the waves of air conditioning, came smells of spices, perfumes, rich aroma of foods and fine new linens. And out of it Zud sprang, with the graceful stride of a beast.

A beast!

When the huge man—he was some inches over six feet tall, with shoulders that blotted out the throne behind him, a chest like a hogshead bursting with wine—had reached the throne and sat down, he pounded the side of his fist on the table and the ministers were permitted to sit up, bow each in turn, and then sit back.

Solo was thankful for the skin-fitting mask he wore to hide his emotions at the first sight of the man.

Zud's head was large, like a lion's head. Solo knew that in its terminal stages the ancient scourge of the East, leprosy, gave its victims the lion-face.

But Zud's was a matter of birth, not disease. He had the look of a lion. His graying hair was like a wine-gold mane that grew down to his shoulders, turned up at the ends, making his head seem more magnificent than ever.

His eyes, under sprouting brows, were relentless, black and fiery, catching all the lights in the room.

He swung his arms in his silken robes, and the gale rustled papers at the far end of the room.

Napoleon Solo felt awed despite himself.

"Well, Kiell! Here you are finally!" The chandeliers shivered when Zud roared.

Solo bowed Kiell's plastic-mask face, his forehead touching the table.

"Don't pretend such humility!" Zud roared. "You're not humble. I'd fear your arrogance if I feared anything on this earth. Such arrogance! You slew the man closest to my heart in the air terminal at Kurbot! My own conscience, my own dear friend—Zouida Berikeen! How then can I trust you, Kiell! If you would cut out my heart, would you not put a bullet in my back if I turned it on you?"

Solo sat for an instant, stunned by Zud's stupendous rage. He felt as Zud did about the dead ambassador. If there was a man in Zabir he'd have staked his life could have been trusted, it was little Zouida. And here he was, wearing the face of the man who had slain him in cold blood.

He saw now why Ordwell, posing as Kiell, had had to accuse Zouida of treason and kill him on the spot. Ordwell's impersonation could not have succeeded under Zouida's close scrutiny.

He drew a deep breath, feeling the sweat trying to squeeze between his skin and the tight-fitting mask. How could he justify a murder he felt in his own heart was tragic and inexcusable? He had to if he wanted to stay alive.

"Speak up!" Zud roared. "Or would you have me lop off your head?"

Solo recalled everything Zouida had said of the real Kiell—a brave, arrogant man, well-hated, but deeply respected—a man who would unhesitatingly lay down his life for his ruler.

"Oh, Zud, if you wish to take my life, you have merely to order my head upon the block!" Solo said, sweating. "If ever I betrayed you, even in my most uncontrolled dreams, I then would order my own life forfeit—"

"Yes! Yes! We know all this!" Zud shouted him down. "Why else do you think you have lived this long? I'm giving you more than you gave Zouida! A chance to be heard."

"Then hear me, O mighty Sultan! Zouida was a weak man, and not working in our best interests."

"You're saying Zouida was a traitor?" Zud leaped to his full height, and Solo half expected to see lightning bolts flare from his fists. "You'll have to do better than this, Kiell!"

"To my best knowledge, Zouida opposed what my king Zud feels is the best course for our nation."

"You mean that? You mean that Zouida opposed our joining forces with the international THRUSH organization?"

"I mean just that. He would have fought us. Perhaps I was rash. But I thought only of the safety of my ruler."

"Incredible. Incredible," Zud whispered.

"I had proof," Solo, persisted.

Slowly, the giant sank to his throne. He put his head back and glared at the jeweled ceiling, glared through it toward Allah, himself. His lion's eyes filled with tears. For a long time he remained like that. Nobody spoke.

Finally, Zud drew his arm across his lion's face and sat up. He moved his gaze across his ministers. He raged at them: "We will follow my plans. Do you understand? If there is another who opposes me, even in his heart—if he would save his own life, let him speak now, and I will swear to him safe conduct to our borders and a life of exile."

He waited, but nobody moved. Some even appeared to have suspended their breathing.

Zud waved his arm again. He stared at Ordwell and Wanda on their knees against the wall, under the guard of the two secret police officers. "Who are these people, Kiell? Did you bring me the man we must have to satisfy THRUSH's demands on us?"

"Napoleon Solo?" Solo said. "That is Solo." He jerked his head toward Ordwell.

"Have you nothing to say, Solo?" Zud raged.

Solo, as Kiell, spoke mildly. "He cannot at this moment say any thing, O King of Lions. I gave him a nerve-paralyzing injection. It will wear off, but it makes him easier to handle."

Zud nodded. "How about the pretty little girl? Can she speak?"

"She can speak, if she has the courage to do it," Solo said.

Zud shouted. "Come here, girl!"

Solo saw Wanda's trembling half across the room. Piebr prodded her and she stood up, came reluctantly forward and stood beside the throne.

"On your knees, female!" Zud shouted.

"Bow to his mighty person!" Solo raged at Wanda.

She went down on her knees, her black eyes round and stricken with terror.

Zud stared down at her. "Beautiful. Like a rare, exotic orchid from the Orient. What a brilliant addition to my present array of loveliness." He shouted suddenly. "You'd hate that, wouldn't you, girl? Because I'm so ugly. Go on. Say it. My own mother thought me ugly. She taunted me because of my ugliness. From the day when I walked from the cradle, I heard her taunts and her jeering.

"She had three handsome sons—and me, the beast! That's what she called her own son. The beast. She was all the loveliness of paradise on this earth. I wanted just one moment of her love, and she called me her ugly little beast. Well, perhaps I was her ugliest, but I became the greatest. Not even she can deny this!"

"No one of this earth can deny your greatness, O Ruler!" cried the twelve ministers in unison and Solo joined them, belatedly.

He frowned, because he found himself admiring Zud. The goodness inside the Gargantuan man showed through his eyes. He shook his head. He had a job to do. If

Zud was his enemy, he would have to fight him, no matter his secret feelings.

Zud said to Wanda, "I ought to make you my slave. I would teach you to accept me in humility. And when I had taught you that, I could force you to marry me—as I have all my wives. But no, I can see the terror in your face, and I am too tired to care anymore. Too much to do!" He clapped his hands. "We have the other prisoner THRUSH required. Kuryakin is in custody still. Put these two with him!"

Solo bowed, and then stood up. He hesitated because he did not know where to go from here. He sweated. The chief of security would know where a political enemy was imprisoned. He couldn't even ask.

Suddenly at his side, Piebr spoke. "This way, Master. Frun and I will go ahead of you."

"Bless you," Solo said under his breath, and then they retreated from the chamber, bowing.

But even when he was in the splendid corridor, following Piebr along it, he still shivered slightly because he had seen in the last moments, a strange doubting light, dazzlingly bright, in Zud's black eyes.

TWO

ILLYA KURYAKIN sprawled in the sumptuous softness of pillows stuffed with flamingo down. He wore linen robes and fed himself from bowls heaped with grapes, chunks of lamb, onion, peppers, roasted tomatoes, hunks of chicken breast.

He sat up in the high-ceilinged, lavishly appointed room, when suddenly the door opened and Solo entered, followed by Ordwell and Wanda under the guard of Piebr and Frun.

They closed the door and the two secret police stood beside it, guns drawn.

Illya waved his arm. "If you've come to take me out of all this opulence, forget it! I'm just learning how to live."

Wanda cried out, "Oh, Illya!"

She ran to him and hurled her self into his arms. She cried, "Illya! Are you all right?"

"I am now!" he said. "It hasn't always been like this. I might have known they were just dolling me up because we were having guests. On the other hand, I don't care why, just so long as it goes on like this."

Wanda said, her voice pitched warningly, "That's poor Napoleon Solo there —" She gestured toward Ordwell, paralyzed, but conscious of all that was going on.

Solo strode forward in his Kiell mask, raging. "Shut up, girl! How many times have I ordered that you say nothing! Nothing! No matter what happens?"

Wanda gasped, realizing she had spoken again when silence was indicated. She pressed herself close to Illya.

Illya smiled, pleased. "Things are getting better all the time. Maybe I'll start my own harem here."

Wanda subsided, still clinging to him. She watched him and Solo in the Kiell mask, frightened.

Solo walked close He held out the key club card with the code X on it. He said, "I believe this is yours. Your clumsy attempt to reveal a secret to your fellow agents."

Wanda's eyes widened as she saw how quickly Illya understood everything. She saw in his face that it was as if he and the masked Solo had spent three hours in urgent exchange of information.

He said, shrugging, "You won't get anything out of me, Kiell. Or my friend Solo there."

Wanda exhaled. It was as if she was breathing for the first time since she had entered this room.

"Where have they moved the woman evangelist?" Solo asked.

"I don't know anything about her, Kiell," Illya said. "I've been telling you that."

"You worked with her when she first arrived in Zabir!" Solo shouted at him.

"You're wrong! How many times do I to tell you fellows I'm here only because your king invited me? I don't know anything about Ann Nelson Wheat. But I'll tell you what I think, Kiell."

"Do that, infidel," Solo said.

"I don't think Ann Nelson Wheat was spying on you people any more than I was. I think you arrested her along with me so you could make it look good to the world—and you want to know what else I think?"

"Yes, if you dare speak!"

"What have I got to lose?" Illya said, shrugging. "I think this whole bit, arresting the evangelist and me, was just to cover up a game of footsie you people are playing with THRUSH."

"That's enough out of you!" Solo shouted.

"Sure." Illya sank back into the pillows. He picked up a roasted chicken breast, took a deep bite, chewing pleasurably. "Just one thing I ask of you. If I'm dreaming, don't wake me up."

"I want information about Ann Nelson Wheat!" Solo raged.

Illya gestured upward toward him. "Then I suggest you talk to Sheik Zud."

Piebr sprang across the room, brandishing a pistol toward Illya.

Illya said, "If you shoot me, friend, be sure you hit me and not this chicken. It's too good to waste."

Piebr snarled at him. But Solo waved the detective back to the door. "It's all right, Piebr. I can handle the infidel."

"He has no right to speak to you in such a tone, Master."

Illya took another bite of chick en. "I was only being friendly. After all, it's a good suggestion. You want to know what happened to Ann Nelson Wheat, Kiell, ask your king. After all, we're his prisoners here; you're not. The head of his security police ought to be able to arrange a private audience with the sultan, it seems to me."

* * *

WHEN THE servants parted the silk curtains at the innermost chambers of the sheik, Solo walked in and bowed low, going down to his knee, hoping this was the correct genuflection expected of a minister-level subject of Zud.

He saw there were two women with Zud. One sat on a recently installed throne that was slightly higher than Zud's. The other woman sat at the ruler's massive feet.

Zud spoke at Solo sharply. "Off your knee. I warned you about this false show of humility. You want me to start mistrusting you? I should never have permitted your going to Harvard for your education. You came back thinking you were just slightly better than any one except Allah himself. I should have sent you to West Point—there they would have taught you to respect your superiors. Off your knee, unless you make obeisance to our most exalted lady, Queen Soraya Haidar of Xanra."

"I pledge my life to both of you," Solo said hesitantly.

Zud threw his head back laughing. "You'd have a difficult time fulfilling such obligation, eh, Soraya? Eh? If he tried to give his life for both of us—since we are in enemy camps, eh?"

"We do not need to be, Zud," Soraya said. Solo saw she was of a loveliness that was breathtaking, a dark and splendid beauty. "We could do much together, you and I."

Zud raged. "Only I am too ugly for you, eh?"

"Only you have ever suggested such a false thing, Your Highness," Soraya said.

"Oh, I know!" Zud shouted. "You're too polite to laugh in my face as my mother did. How do you hold your laughter until you get back among your own ladies-in-waiting?"

"There is no laughter in my heart, except that I would share with you, O Mighty King, if you would let me."

Solo saw the pain in Soraya's black eyes, the love that shone there for the huge king. He decided that if the King of Lions couldn't see it, the beast was as blind as a bat.

"So you taunt me in a different way than my mother did;" Zud said. He leaped up, raging. "But in the end it is the same. I don't blame you, Queen of Xanra. I know that if I want your hand, I'd have to overthrow your country and enslave you, wouldn't I?"

"I am ready to join my country, and my heart with yours, when I hear it asked of me," the lovely queen answered.

Zud put back his head, laughing. "Well, it's good to have you visit me! It reminds me of the ugly brute I am. I had to enslave the women I made marry me. Perhaps in the end I shall force you to marry me, Soraya, unless your larger army is finally victorious over mine."

Xanra's Queen stood up. Her face was bleak. "I shall leave you now, Great Zud. I come to you no more to ask for peace. I am sorry. Good-by."

The great man sank to his knees and kissed the hem of her skirt. He looked up at her. "Despite my devotion, I pray you will marry a man good enough, handsome enough, great enough for you, O Queen."

"I hope I shall, too," Soraya answered, and Solo knew what she meant, even if the king were too blind to see.

Solo sighed. He reflected that if he'd grown up on his mother's taunts, instead of the love he'd longed for, he, too, might have grown to doubt that any woman could care for him.

He scowled. He had to quit finding excuses for the things Zud did. The sheik had already revealed that he was planning an alliance with THRUSH, that international conspiracy against which U.N.C.L.E. waged constant battle. He and Zud were deadly enemies. He had to remember that, every minute.

He stood, waiting, until Queen Soraya had walked out of the splendid chamber. For some moments after Xanra's ruler was gone, Zud stood immobile staring impatiently after her.

Finally, he turned. He glared at Kiell. "We must redouble our efforts, Kiell! I want to marry her. Whatever else I have on earth is as nothing unless she is mine."

"If you married her," Solo said, "you need not wage war against Xanra."

Zud oaths turned the air in the room a hazy blue. He looked as if he'd attack his security minister.

"So you think to taunt me, too, eh, my Harvard delinquent? Just because I let Soraya tease me about my ugliness, you think you can get away with it?"

"No one thinks you're ugly, Zud," said the woman on the floor.

She was in her late twenties, lovely, in spite of a certain prudishness about her that Solo associated with women who turn to religion to the exclusion of everything earthly. He caught his breath, knowing he was seeing Ann Nelson Wheat, the evangelist from Los Angeles.

"Except you yourself," she went on. "You torment yourself and hurt others, because you're still trying to get even with your foolish mother."

"Listen to the evangelist, Kiell! Oh, in America, they allow their women to speak right up, eh? Listen to me, Ann Wheat! Nobody thinks me ugly in this country because they don't dare to! They think I'm ugly. And my mirror swears to it that I resemble a great beast!"

"It's all in your own mind," Ann Wheat said. "Like many other of your wrong ideas."

"Listen to her!" Zud shouted. "Do you know what she has told me? That it is wrong to have more than one wife? What can be wrong? What would a man do with just one wife? Eh, Kiell?"

Solo shrugged, smiling behind his plastic mask.

Zud said, "Enough of this talk. You teach my wives any more of this equality of women, Ann Wheat, and I'll have you beheaded. This time for sure. Meantime, get out of here so I can talk to my minister of security—as though I had any security."

When the woman evangelist was gone, Solo said, "What do you plan to do with her?"

"When our war with Xanra is won, I'll let her go home, if she still wants to. She came here to convert us—perhaps she'll learn much here. But do not presume to ask explanations of your ruler, Zud. I have been too long patient with you."

"Too long, Zud." Solo bowed low.

"Now, we have promised to deliver Illya Kuryakin and Napoleon Solo to THRUSH. What they do with them is THRUSH'S concern, not ours. We want only the aid THRUSH has promised in our battle with Xanra. I want you to deliver Illya Kuryakin, Napoleon Solo and the young Chinese doll as a bonus to THRUSH. Tonight."

Solo swallowed hard. He had no idea where the THRUSH agents were, or where they might be found. He waited, but Zud only stared at him.

"Well!" Zud shouted. "What are you waiting for? This Kuryakin has made one attempt already to escape. I want them delivered now. If they do escape, Kiell, do not dare to show your face to me again, or by Allah, I will lop off your head personally and feed it to the tigers."

"I will not fail you, King of Lions."

Zud's laughter shook the silk draperies at the windows. "For your own sake, Kiell," he roared, "I hope you don't."

His wild laughter followed Napoleon Solo from the chamber.

Solo walked back into the sumptuous chambers where Illya and Wanda were held prisoners.

He closed the door. A soldier came to attention at his side.

He gave the young soldier only a glance, seeing that he was youthful, his face serious, his black eyes lighted with the fires of the fanatic. He thought, a fitting subject to be ruled by Zud.

He saw that Illya, Piebr, Wanda and Frun were sitting on the pillows in a circle, laughing, chatting and eating from the bowls of food and fruit. Only Piebr laughed less than the others, seemed preoccupied.

Ordwell remained on the floor, in what seemed to be a catatonic trance.

"What's going on here!" Solo said. "Fraternizing with the enemy?"

"Your men have been working sixteen hours without food, Kiell," Illya said. "We're just feeding them."

"Suppose they poison your food!" Solo shouted.

Both Piebr and Frun leaped to theft feet.

Illya said, "Where could we get poison? They issued me these clothes. They brought the food themselves. And Aly David on guard over there should be promoted to general in your army, Kiell! He foiled my escape. You know why? Because though his friends mean much to him, his country means more."

Solo turned his back on the laughing Illya. He said, "Piebr!"

The young detective stepped forward, clicking his heels together.

"What's the matter with you, Piebr?" Solo said. "You act as if you had the weight of the world on your shoulders."

"No, Master, it is nothing." Piebr stared straight ahead. But tears brimmed his eyes.

Illya shouted. "He's afraid to say anything in your presence. But how can you be so unfeeling? It's his father you shot tonight—as you well know!"

Illya's voice rose and hackles stood on Solo's neck. Zouida Berikeen. Piebr's father! "Yet you expect him to perform like a machine."

Solo exhaled heavily. He spoke without looking at the young detective. "Take the night off, Piebr."

"If you please, Master, I'd rather work. I think less, working, about my father. If he was a traitor, he had to die. It is just so hard to believe. But—I do believe you, Master! You would do nothing to harm this country or our ruler."

Solo winced, still unable to look at Piebr. He had not killed Piebr's father, but he wore the mask that Ordwell had used when Ordwell had killed the ambassador. He wondered, as he had wondered for a long time now, who had killed the real Kiell, and had this mask awaiting the arrival of Ordwell on the plane?

He tightened his hands into fists, knowing the answer to that question, even if he didn't know the names of the actual traitors who were double-crossing Zud and all of Zabir. His old friends THRUSH.

He said, voice cold, "Piebr, do you know where the agents of THRUSH await our delivery of these prisoners?"

Piebr nodded.

"Good," Solo said. "Then you will drive us there. Frun and this soldier will go along as guards. Our orders are to leave at once."

Piebr bowed and backed away. "I will arrange for a car right away, Master."

Wanda cried softly. Illya put his arm around her, whispered, "It is no time to think about safety, Wanda. We'll never be safe until we ferret out THRUSH —and destroy it, eh?"

Wanda nodded, understanding. She stood up, ready to go.

In a matter of minutes Piebr returned, saying a car and driver awaited them at a side exit.

Solo thanked him, nodded to ward Ordwell. "Take Solo out to the car, leave Frun to guard him and return for us."

He waited until Frun and Piebr struggled with the leg-dragging Ordwell through the door. Then he saw that the young soldier remained standing at attention just inside the room.

"Guard the hall," Solo ordered.

Aly David hesitated a moment, then nodded. "As you command, Master." He stepped through the door, closed it after him.

Solo went directly to Illya, gave him a loaded pistol to conceal in the folds of his linen robe.

"We've got to make at least the bluff of turning the three of you over to THRUSH," he said.

Illya hid the gun. "I understand. But tell me something. Where'd you get the mask? You know—on you it's an improvement."

"I'll worry about my looks when we learn what nonsense THRUSH is up to."

"Then let's get on the road," Illya said, moving toward the door.

"Don't I get a gun?" Wanda cried.

Solo stared at her. "I should get shot in the back? You hang close to Illya—and keep absolutely quiet, no matter what happens."

With Piebr leading them, and Aly David bringing up the rear, they went hurriedly through the brilliant halls to a waiting car.

The driver sped out a side gate, drove along the high wall to the four-lane highway and turned north toward Kurbot.

Solo, Illya, Piebr and run sat on the rear seat. Ordwell was sprawled across their feet. Solo could feel the stocky man stir as the effects of the

neuroquixonal wore off.

"How much further?" he asked.

"Not many kilometers, Master. As you know, THRUSH'S agents have taken over Sheik Zud's retreat at Paradise Oasis."

"Yes, of course," Solo said. "So much on my mind."

They were silent for the rest of the drive through the desert night. The stillness pervaded everything, bearing down on the car like a tangible pressure.

Wanda sat huddled between the young driver and Aly David on the front seat. Solo wanted to say something to reassure her, but he could think of nothing. There were no words.

The car swung off the highway, going east on a secondary road over sand dunes in washboard monotony.

Suddenly ahead a splash of electric lights illuminated the sky-reaching date palms of Paradise Oasis. Beyond the twenty-room villa, stark oil derricks reared against the roof of heaven, their pumps pounding like the heart of parasites, sucking life from the earth.

Lights burned in every room of the retreat, a concrete and stucco mansion cresting a small hill above the pool of water in the heart of the oasis.

"Something is odd, Master," Piebr said. "There are no lights on the exterior of the house."

"Yes." Solo ordered the driver to slow the car. They peered into the darkness, seeing nothing moving in the deep shadows of oleander bushes, lemon trees, fig bushes. Still, Solo shared Piebr's instinct of something being wrong.

"Drive all the way to the front door," he told the chauffeur.

The chauffeur allowed the car to roll to the wide steps before the spacious veranda. The silence continued unbroken. The pumps throbbed away in the darkness.

"Leave your lights burning," Solo said.

Aly David got out of the car first. He walked up to the top step, stood looking around, gun at ready across his chest. Piebr opened one rear door and jumped out, gun in hand, Frun exited from the other. Still nothing happened.

Then Solo bent down, getting out of the car. As his head cleared the protection of the bullet proofed glass, guns erupted like orange flares in the Stygian darkness and the night went wild.

Solo hit the ground hard, looking around for a target. Piebr crouched in against the car, gun ready.

Above them, Aly David sank to his knee, gun against his shoulder.

Bullets screamed like raging hornets past them. Frun fired once, and there were dozens of answering shots, the bullets ripping into the car.

Suddenly a woman's voice broke across the sound of gun fire via a public address system. The guns were quieted, waiting.

"Solo," the voice said. "Tell the deluded men with you to lay down their arms, or they will be slain along with you. We have guns fixed on you from the darkness, and from all the windows on the lower floor behind you."

Solo glanced up at the lighted windows, saw the dark forms in them, guns held ready.

"Ordwell," the voice said. "Are you there?"

Solo watched the stocky man pull himself from the car. He managed to stand up, the effects of the neuroquixonal fading swiftly as he moved around.

"I'm here," Ordwell called.

"Then disarm them," the woman's voice ordered. "All of them. Then march them into the house." Her voice took on an air of contempt. "THRUSH hopes you can accomplish this."

Solo heard Orwell gasp in rage, but he made no reply. He moved, from Piebr to Aly David to Frun, gathering the weapons. A man appeared from the darkness and collected them. Then Ordwell came close to Solo.

"Your gun, Mr. Solo," he said.

Solo heard Piebr's sharp intake of breath. He did not glance toward the young detective.

Ordwell took the gun, barrel first, closed his fist over it and coldly back-handed Solo across the head with it.

Solo staggered to his knees, feeling the blood trickling from the cut down the inside of the plastic mask. For a moment all the date palms were strung with glittering stars of a million hues, and then darkness settled. He gritted his teeth, managed to hang on to consciousness.

He heard Ordwell snarling at him. "On your feet. Move, Solo. Or I'll kill you, just as I killed that fool ambassador in the airport terminal."

Solo managed to pull himself up slowly. Illya came out of the car, supported him. And after a moment, Piebr stepped close to him, lending the strength of his arm, Solo was thankful Piebr finally knew the truth about the senseless slaying of his father.

Piebr whispered savagely, "Somehow, by the grace of Allah, we will get out of this. I know now they slew not only my good and faithful father, but also the protector of my country, the real Kiell."

"Shut up!" Ordwell said. "Get him inside the house. Move. All of you."

They were herded into a living room, shut off from other rooms by silken draperies of bright colors. Solo staggered slightly as he walked. He would

have fallen except that Piebr and Illya supported him. Objects and people in the room wavered before his eyes.

They stood some moments in this room, alone. Even Ordwell grew restive. He glared around at the silken draperies. "Well, what's wrong now? Here they are. THRUSH wanted Solo and Kuryakin delivered as hostages. Here they are!"

Ordwell Slybrough laughed in triumph. He gripped the plastic mask over Solo's face, slipped a knife blade under it and cut it away.

He jerked it off Solo's head. He stared a moment in sadistic satisfaction at the cut across Solo's temple, the blood streaming along his cheek.

"Here he is!" he shouted.

The silken drapes parted and Pretty Wilde came through them, followed by two scowling native gunmen.

Solo stared at her, the gash in his temple for the moment forgotten, or supplanted by a more poignant agony. Pretty Wilde was lovelier than ever in black blouse and black stretch pants which seemed annealed to her stockpiled elegance.

Even Illya Kuryakin whistled faintly between his teeth.

She smiled at Solo. "Well, Tiger. Here we are. We meet again."

Solo stared at her. "A THRUSH agent," he said.

"That's right, Tiger." She laughed. "I told you I was—Pretty Wilde."

"You really are," Solo said.

ACT IV

INCIDENT OF THE VOLATILE AGENT

AT GUNPOINT, Pretty Wilde and her silent executioners ushered Solo and Kuryakin through silken drapes into a smaller room, completely remodeled in electronic modern.

The men from U.N.C.L.E. stared in astonishment at this chamber banked with the sort of broadcasting and receiving equipment one might expect to find in the home plant of RCA.

Three men with headphones sat in chairs that glided silently on casters from one machine to the next. Bright eyes of varying colors flashed across the faces of the sets.

One of the technicians gave all of his attention to a complex rectangular box topped with a seventeen-inch television tube set at an angle. The metal machine hummed to life; the black eye of the screen lightened, brightened, and then held, as if waiting.

"All of this just for us, Pretty?" Solo said.

Pretty glanced at him along the nose of her gun. "You might say that. It offers you your only chance to leave here alive."

"I for one am almost morbidly interested in this idea," Solo said.

"And I," Kuryakin agreed.

"As you see, it's a suggestion that's caught right on with both of us," Solo said. "Please tell us more."

"It's very simple. One of our scientists, Dr. Polar Fuch, on the verge of a breakdown and suffering delusions, managed to steal a vital machine from us."

"Ah, yes. The atom separator," Solo said, recalling Waverly's demonstrating this weapon to him in United Network headquarters. "A machine that Dr. Fuch invented."

"A non-essential detail, since he was working for us, and all of his creations automatically became—"

"A machine he planned for peaceful analysis, which is not the use THRUSH planned for it," Solo persisted.

"Another quibbling detail," Pretty said, shrugging. "The important fact to us, and you two, is that the machine is ours, and we want it back. Now. We're willing to make a trade with United Net work Command. Your lives, and the bonus life of that girl in there, in exchange for our machine."

Solo shrugged. "We haven't the authority to—"

"Of course you haven't! But we can talk to Alexander Waverly via this sender-receiver. Give us the channel, and we'll discuss the trade with Waverly. If he agrees to deliver the machine to an address we'll give him in Manhattan, we will escort you safely to the air terminal at Kurbot."

"We couldn't do that," Solo said. "Breach of security."

"I forgot to tell you. You have five minutes to make up your minds."

"If you kill us, you won't have much bargaining power, will you?" Solo said.

Pretty Wilde gave him a twisted smile. "We'll keep the two of you alive only long enough to exhaust all means of making a trade. But that girl in there—the other people with you—they are expendable. They mean nothing to us. We will systematically kill them, starting with the girl, beginning in just five minutes."

Solo winced, glancing at Illya.

Pretty Wilde said, "Have you the authority to sentence that girl to certain death in—four and one—half minutes?"

"Time," Illya said, lifting his hand. "Maybe it's became I've been so close to death these past weeks. I think we ought to cooperate, Solo. Give them the channel. As soon as they contact Waverly this once, technicians will

scramble the signals in that channel, change the wave-length. What can we lose, except our lives?"

After a second Napoleon Solo merely nodded, and Illya Kuryakin said smiling into Pretty Wilde's sardonic face: "Channel D, my pretty little cobra. And hurry, will you?"

Pretty Wilde jerked her head to ward the waiting technician. He turned knobs, pressed buttons. The hum deepened, then rose to a keening wail, gradually waned. Jagged lines on the picture-tube screen settled into the interior of the U.N.C.L.E. Command Room and then closed in on Alexander Waverly's face.

"Can you see us, Mr. Waverly?" Pretty asked, speaking into a microphone.

"Yes. You're coming in beautifully. Lovely girl. I hope you are friendly."

"That's up to you, Mr. Waverly," Pretty Wilde said. "We show you THRUSH'S latest prize."

Solo and Kuryakin were photographed by the machine camera. Waverly said, "Yes. Well, they're not nearly as eye-catching as you are. But I'm glad to see them."

"If you want them alive, you will agree to return the atom-separator to ten-twenty West Eight Street in Manhattan. It will do your agents no good to go there. It is merely a place for receiving this particular shipment."

"I was sure of that," Waverly said.

"Agree, we'll return Solo and Kuryakin. Refuse, and THRUSH will kill them. You'll agree, Mr. Waverly, that THRUSH has no compunctions about killing them THRUSH has many scores to settle with them. Since time is important, I'll give you one minute to make up your mind."

Waverly gave her his chilliest grin across the thousands of miles. "I cannot give you a direct answer. Since word came that both my agents had fallen

into THRUSH'S hands, I've been expecting to get some sort of offer like this. We are prepared with a counter offer."

"Here's where we learn just how expendable we are," Illya whispered.

"We authorize Solo and Kuryakin to make the decision about returning the atom separator," Waverly said, "knowing what destruction such a lethal weapon could wreak in THRUSH'S conscienceless possession, the lives and property lost—"

"When he waves the flag," Illya said, "I'm walking out."

"—if they call back in one hour saying they want the machine returned to you, we will agree to do it. When they get in touch with our people at the air terminal at Kurbot, instant delivery of said machine will be made to the address here in Manhattan. Over and out."

The screen flickered, became a scrambled pattern of jagged lines, screeching interference.

"They've scrambled channel D out of existence," Illya said;

Solo nodded. "You know what that means, don't you?"

"I'm way ahead of you. It means we're expendable, that Waverly doesn't expect to hear from us again."

Pretty stared at them in frustration and rage. "How will you get in touch with him now?"

Solo gave her a pained smile. "That's it, Pretty. We can't get in touch with him now. Not through any of your infernal gadgets. The next move is up to THRUSH."

TWO

ILLYA PROWLED the impregnable cellar under Zud's oasis retreat like a lynx unable to believe a cage could hold him.

Along the walls, the chauffeur, Aly David, Frun and Piebr sat in round-shouldered dejection. Wanda slumped on a sack of grain, staring unseeingly at the floor.

Solo tested the walls, found no weakness, no object his ingenuity could convert to offensive weaponry. He leaned against the wall.

"We've got to agree to give THRUSH the machine, Illya," Solo decided. The other hostages glanced up, not daring to hope. "These people will die first, starting in less than an hour now. We don't have the right to sacrifice them."

"We voted," Aly David said. The others nodded in assent. "We are more fortunate than you and Kuryakin in that we die first."

"Yes," Piebr said. "The waiting is the worst."

"No!" Solo straightened. "We've got to get out of here. If we only had a gun."

Illya withdrew the automatic Solo had given him at the palace.

Solo stared at him. "How did they miss that?"

Illya shrugged. "Ordwell. Wasn't thinking straight. Never occurred to him you'd arm a prisoner—me."

Aly David came up off the floor without touching his hands to it. His dark face glowed.

"Give me one gun, and I'll turn it into an arsenal!" he shouted.

Solo nodded. Illya handed over the gun.

Aly hefted it a moment m his hand, grinning, then started toward the door.

"Hold it," Solo said.

Aly David paused. Solo ripped open the seed sack. "Everybody. Hands full of seed."

They all scooped up seed. Solo lined them on each side of the door. Aly David took aim on the lock, fired once. The thick door quivered, hung there, slightly ajar.

In that instant a heavy boot thrust it open and an armed guard burst through, rifle up.

Handfuls of seed struck him in the face, blinding him, stopping him for the fraction of a second. It was too long. Aly David struck him with the gun butt neatly behind the ear and he pitched face first to the floor.

Frun caught up the rifle before it struck the floor and Piebr knelt, taking the hand gun from the guard's holster.

At the open door, Aly David wheeled around and fired upward. A second guard toppled down the stone steps. Illya got the second guard's rifle, and Solo snatched the hand gun from his bolster. They were already moving up the long stairs.

Wanda wailed, "I still don't have a gun!"

Solo said, "You stay right here at the head of these stairs until we clear a way out of here. We'll come back for you." When she opened her mouth to protest, he rasped, "That's an order, Wanda!"

She nodded miserably.

He closed the stairwell door, leaving it slightly ajar. The sound of running men was heard from the corridors. Solo motioned his party to fan out.

As the men came through the door, the waiting men, crouched along the walls, shot them. They moved forward, room to room.

Illya scouted ahead. He saw movement in draperies, fired into it. Two snipers fell forward, ripping down the draperies with them.

They reached the front room. Solo jerked his head toward the radio room. Illya shot the door open, then emptied the rifle into the sending sets.

"I'll get Wanda," Solo said. The others crowded at the front door, waiting, alert as Solo turned.

Across the foyer, Pretty Wilde appeared. "I think you'll stay where you are, Mr. Solo."

Solo stared at her. Pretty gave him a cold smile. "Did you think I was a fool like those men, to run into your trap?" She motioned with the machine pistol. "Drop those guns. All of you. I can cut you down with this if you move."

"Drop the guns," Solo said, shrugging helplessly.

"You are wise, Mr. Solo," Pretty Wilde said. "Now if you'll be smart enough to tell your superiors we have run out of patience and want our machine." She lifted her voice. "Ordwell! Come down here and keep these prisoners covered."

A whisper of sound behind Pretty Wilde made her shiver. But she hesitated, afraid for the moment to take her gaze off the five prisoners. When she had to swing around, it was too late.

Wanda cracked her across the skull with the spiked heel of her slipper. Pretty Wilde crumpled to the floor. "I could have done so much better," Wanda wailed across the room at Solo, "if I'd just had a gun."

Piebr dropped to his knee, grabbed up an automatic as Ordwell ran out to the head of the stairs.

Aly and Illya, too, caught up guns as Ordwell jerked up a machine pistol, but Piebr screamed. "No! He's mine!"

Piebr fired. His bullet struck Ordwell cleanly in the solar plexus. In a slow movement, Ordwell Slybrough dropped the machine pistol and then toppled over and over down the wide stairway.

As he reached the landing, Piebr was there. Zouida's son emptied the gun into the body of his father's slayer. Then he threw the gun down upon the bullet-riddled killer.

When Piebr turned, his eyes were bright with tears, but his head tilted in triumph.

Solo caught Wanda in the circle of his arm. He laughed down into her face. "Come on, Agent Kim! You just became one of the boys! And now, in the name of Allah, let's get out of here."

* * *

THE BLACK CAR raced toward the iron gates in the palace wall.

The driver pressed the horn hard. After a moment the gates were shoved open and the car sped through.

Napoleon Solo whistled as their limousine was braked down at the base of the forty steps. There were no servants out to greet them to day, but from all sides green-suited soldiers converged on them, bayonets reflecting the sun blindingly.

"I knew we were heroes," Illya Kuryakin said in sarcasm, "but I never expected a greeting like this."

"Any twenty-one gun salutes we get will be in our backs," Solo agreed, watching the threatening faces of the soldiers.

A dark-skinned officer jerked the door open and screamed orders at them in a dialect.

Solo glanced helplessly at Piebr. "What'd he say?"

Aly David spoke over his shoulder. "We are to get out of the car slowly, with our hands locked on top of our heads."

Solo smiled weakly. "If this is a friendly greeting," he said, "it loses something in translation."

Sheik Zud padded about the eighty-by-fifty conference chamber. The huge council room looked too small to contain the huge man and his massive grief.

Half the room was in darkness.

When Solo, Kuryakin and the others were led into the council room, Zud let them stand for some moments while he strode back and forth, his lion's face contorted with a sadness that furrowed it from brow to jawline.

At last, he turned and faced them. "Piebr!"

Zouida's son stepped forward and knelt near the table in the center of the light near his ruler. "Your Majesty?" he said.

"Piebr, I am being betrayed! By the only people I trusted and loved with all my heart."

"No, Majesty!"

Zud's roar shook the chandeliers, echoed inside the long room. "First, your father. Now you! Gone over to the enemy!"

"Majesty, no! My own father gave his life serving you with his last breath, as I will do if Allah grants it!"

"Don't lie!" Zud roared. "Look!" He waved his arm and an unseen servant snapped a switch. A single, high-powered light played down on a body laid out on a high table draped with robes. The onlookers held their breath.

"Kiell," Piebr whispered.

"Yes. Kiell. We found his body. Slain. Stuffed into a baggage locker at the Kurbot airport! The great Kiell! To be so foully treated in death! Did you kill him? Or did that one there?"

He thrust out his arm, pointing an accusing finger at Solo. "You're the one who impersonated Kiell, aren't you? Clever! In a plastic mask. I could not believe it was Kiell, and yet my heart would not believe I could lose Kiell and Zouida in the same moment."

"No, Majesty!" Piebr cried in anguish. "None of us in this room has betrayed you. We have slain the man who killed both Kiell and my father! The conspiracy of these people was against you, Majesty, not in your interests."

"How can you know of this?" Zud shouted.

Solo stepped forward. "Majesty, Piebr speaks the truth. THRUSH agreed to aid you in a war against Xanra, and in exchange you were to deliver Kuryakin and me to be held as hostages by THRUSH. Isn't that true?"

"I need aid in my battle!" Zud shouted. "Xanra is four times the size of my country, with ten times the population! I take aid where I can find it.'

"Yes. And did you know that THRUSH meant to use Illya Kuryakin and me to achieve the return of a lethal war machine?"

"Yes!" Zud strode back and forth beyond the table. "I was told the weapon would be a great aid in my unequal battle."

"THRUSH wanted to use that weapon—as fearful and evil as the use of the hydrogen bomb. Devastating. Did you want Xanra laid waste?"

Zud tilted his leonine head, jaw thrust forward, but finally he shook his head, his massive shoulders slumping. "I did not understand."

"THRUSH was using you. THRUSH would have helped you win the war against Xanra. But Xanra would be rubble, its people destroyed or deformed. Then the world would see the graphic demonstration of

THRUSH'S newest weapon. That was what THRUSH wanted. And when the war with Xanra was ended, its queen victim of that inhuman machine —"

"No!" The growl of agony was torn from Zud's throat.

"Yes!" Solo said relentlessly. "And you would have ended up a puppet of THRUSH, without power, without glory—to live out your life knowing what you had done to your neighbors in a war that doesn't even need to be fought."

Zud straightened to his full height, staring down at Solo. "What are you saying—a useless war?"

"You know it, King Zud. In your heart. Better than I do. Why did you go to war with Xanra? To prove that you could conquer it. To prove to its queen —as you once proved to your mother—how great you were. But you didn't need to do that. Queen Soraya knows your greatness. She loves you."

"What? No woman so beautiful cou1d love such a beast as I."

"Then why did she come here repeatedly on missions of peace, King Zud? Her country is larger, richer than yours. She didn't have to sue for peace, but she did! She even talked of marriage with you."

"No woman would marry me, unless she was forced into it."

"I heard her say she would."

"To stop the war. Only to stop the war."

"No. She loves you. Anyone but you could see it. Just as you should be able to see that Piebr here is as loyal as the slain Kiell, and trained by him to take his place. And Frun—meant to be a diplomat, like the lamented Zouida. And—"

"And Aly David, your most loyal soldier!" Illya Kuryakin said. "Fighting for you, even when his heart broke because he disagreed with what you

were doing to Queen Soraya and Xanra. A brilliant soldier, waiting to make your untried armies great."

"Young men," Solo said, "anxious to serve you with their hearts and minds. Ready to make this nation—and you—greater than ever. Especially when you are joined in alliance with the Queen of Xanra through marriage."

Zud prowled the carpeting. He stared at Napoleon Solo, at Illya Kuryakin, at the young men awaiting his decision.

The door of the council chambers was thrown open. A young army officer burst through.

Zud raged. "How dare you burst unannounced—"

"Majesty!" The officer prostrated himself before the sheik. "Word comes that a woman named Pretty Wilde, with the mercenary troops sent into Zabir to aid you, have revolted against you. They have taken over all the refineries."

Zud shook his bead. "We'll get them back." He looked around, uncertainly. "It may take a bit of time, but—"

"Majesty. That is only part of the communiqué. This army has kidnapped Queen Soraya of Xanra as she returned under our escort to her own border. She is being held hostage until you, O King of Lions, agree to carry out your contract with THRUSH."

Zud sank into one of the chairs beside the table. His wide shoulders sagged, his eyes held torment, and he gazed about, distracted.

Aly David stepped forward. "Majesty, if you would permit, I'll take an army and retrieve the refineries. I vow to drive every mercenary across our borders."

Sheik Zud stared for one more moment at the zeal burning in Aly David's black eyes. He made his decision, and leaped to his feet.

"So be it!" He shouted. "I name you, Aly David, commander of all my troops. I charge you to drive out the mercenary and the invader."

Aly David knelt. "I pledge my life to it."

Zud moved quickly to Frun. "And you, Frun, will immediately assume the duties of the late Ambassador Zouida Berikeen. You will notify all nations that Zabir honors no false alliances with any secret conspiracies, that from this day Zabir intends to take its place among the honorable nations of the world."

Frun knelt beside Aly David. "Allah hears my vow to serve you now and forever, sire."

Zud nodded impatiently. "Before you leave to attend the United Nations sessions, I request that go at once to Xanra and assure that nation that all warlike threats from Zabir are ended from this hour. Our forces will withdraw to stated boundaries. And that my secret police will find their queen and restore her, or I, Zud, place my own life in forfeit for hers."

"It will be done," Frun said. He got up from his knee, kissed the king's ring and strode from the room, followed quickly by Aly David.

"If Kiell were alive," Zud said, his voice quavering, "I would say to him, 'Kiell, find Soraya, return her to safety, and punish those who threaten her with harm.'"

He gazed about the room, distracted. "I would say this much to Kiell, and I would know it would be done as surely as the east sky across the desert of Zur will burn with tomorrow's dawn."

He pressed his huge hands over his face. "I would know it. As I breathed, I would know it. Ah, without you, Kiell—" he stretched out his arm toward the body on the silken bier. "Without you, I am truly lost."

Piebr stepped forward and knelt. "Majesty, I am not Kiell. I was only his assistant. I cannot vow to you as Kiell would have done. But, Sire, I am the son of Zouida Berikeen. I can swear to my ruler that my last breath will be

spent in assuring the safety of Queen Soraya if you will but allow me this chance to serve you."

Zud straightened, shaking himself, as if returning to this moment from his distracted thoughts. He stared at Piebr vacantly. He said, "Oh, Piebr, forgive me. I am overwhelmed with grief. I name you minister of security. Let your first duty be the escorting of these people to the air terminal of Kurbot and secure their safe passage to New York."

"But your Majesty! Queen Soraya!"

Zud shook his head and smiled. "You are too young, Piebr. I remember when you played at your father's knee in this room. I will not imperil your life by matching you against the professional killers trained by THRUSH. No. We must let the army handle this and pray Allah for Soraya's safety."

Solo said, "Forgive me, Majesty. I realize you have been patient, and I have spoken too much. But one suggestion?"

"Speak," Zud said.

"I know your reluctance to trust the skills of a man you remember as a child, close to you. But Piebr is a clever and resourceful man, trained by Kiell himself. Perhaps Kiell meant that Piebr would some day replace him. Piebr must be tried under fire if he is ever to serve you as Kiell did. And I must warn you that when THRUSH realizes you will not knuckle under, they may well slay Soraya in order to set Xanra forever against you."

Zud shook his head. "What then can we do?"

"Trust Piebr. Set him in charge. Trust him. Allow me, and my agents to aid him. Order Aly David to move his armies to within sight of the mercenaries —but to hold their fire until Piebr, with us, can locate and confer with the THRUSH people for Soraya's safety."

Zud waved his arm, nodded. "So be it. And may Allah speed you and bless you."

* * *

PIEBR DROVE the forward jeep. In it rode two of his plainclothes operatives, armed with handguns, equipped with hidden machine pistols and hand grenades.

Solo drove the second jeep. Illya slouched beside him, the wind thrusting through his fair hair. Wanda sat in the back seat, armed with a machine pistol which she held across her lap.

Piebr's intelligence had placed Pretty Wilde, the THRUSH operatives working for her, and their royal prisoner at the refinery near El Massif.

A mile from the refinery Piebr halted. One of his operatives slid under the wheel of the forward jeep. Piebr walked back to where Solo had braked the second car.

"I will drive from here," Piebr said. He glanced at Wanda. "You will hide all guns and grenades when we reach the gate. Our plan is that we will get in to the THRUSH agent in charge by agreeing to exchange the three of you for the kidnapped queen."

Napoleon Solo moved over. Illya Kuryakin sat in the rear with Wanda. Piebr drove past the other jeep, and so they arrived at the chain-link fences surrounding the huge refinery. Even in the darkness the great storage tanks gleamed metallically, strung together by elephantine pipes.

Solo whistled. Troops of mercenaries lined the roads, the fences, stood guard at all the tanks and pumping stations. They were halted at the gate while the officer in charge made a phone call.

The duty officer replaced the receiver, stepped out of the guard shack. "Search them and send them in."

Soldiers searched the two jeeps, confiscated all weapons and grenades. Wanda's face sagged as she watched her machine pistol added to the stack inside the guard shack.

Three weapon carriers pulled alongside the jeeps and convoyed them to a brightly lighted administration building. A dozen armed mercenaries marched the six prisoners into the tiled-floored building. Sandbags had been placed near windows and doors.

At a desk in the rear of a large, well-illuminated office Pretty Wilde sat with a squad of hand picked personal body guards.

Pretty wore a bandage jauntily about her head. She stared malevolently at Wanda. Near a window Queen Soraya of Xanra sat with two ladies-in-waiting at her knees.

"King Zud offers the agents of U.N.C.L.E. in exchange for the life and safety of Queen Xanra," Piebr said.

Pretty Wilde smiled coldly at the new minister of security. "You speak boldly for an unarmed man."

Piebr did not blink. "We are indeed unarmed. But this refinery is surrounded by five thousand troops, led by General Aly David."

Pretty considered this. "Is Zud welching on his agreement with THRUSH? Our agreement to aid him in conquering Xanra, in return for certain concessions?"

Piebr smiled coldly. "Let's say the king has reconsidered. Let me add that momentarily a flash gun will be fired over the dunes. This is the signal for our troops to attack this refinery. Small cannon are at this moment trained on those storage tanks. Does one need to do more than suggest what would happen if only one cannon scores a hit on one tank?"

Solo saw Pretty Wilde's lovely face pale. "You play a rough game of poker, don't you?"

"Never deceive yourself that I am bluffing. I suggest that you hastily agree that my men and I remove Queen Soraya from this imperiled zone. I believe even THRUSH might have great difficulty recovering from her death in these circumstances."

Pretty waved her arm. "Take her and her sniveling wenches. Get her out of here."

Piebr nodded. He and his men strode across the room, escorted the queen and the frightened ladies out of the door to a jeep. The soldiers stepped back and stood aside as the jeep raced toward the gates.

At the precise instant that Piebr's jeep hurtled through the gate, a flare burst like a meteor over the dunes outside the refinery.

Its orange light illuminated the office. Pretty Wilde gazed around in panic.

"They're attacking. Kill these three people and let's get out of here," she shouted at her bodyguard.

But Illya Kuryakin shook his arm and let a hand grenade roll from the folds of his silk robe. "Here's one they missed!" He jerked out the pin. "Now. Pretty Wilde, your men can shoot me, but we'll all go up in the biggest holocaust this part of the world has seen since Gomorrah burned."

"Hold your fire!" Pretty Wilde screamed in panic.

Illya Kuryakin jerked his head toward the doors. Distantly they heard gunfire. It grew louder as Aly David's men approached, full speed.

Solo leaped into the jeep, started the engine. Wanda dove into the rear, head first, striking the seat and lying there, face down.

Solo had the car in motion as Illya sprang into the other seat. All over the refinery, mercenaries were running to their battle stations.

Solo shouted at Illya. "You're still carrying that grenade!"

"Why waste it on her?" Illya shouted.

As they roared past a huge storage tank, Illya lobbed the grenade toward it. For an instant, breathless silence hung over the desert.

"Faster! Faster!" Illya Kuryakin shouted.

At that instant, the grenade exploded. Solo pressed harder on the gas. The exploding grenade burst the seam of the tank, and the second explosion followed immediately. The earth rumbled, shivering. The jeep danced wildly, turning all the way around before Napoleon Solo could right it.

He straightened the jeep in the road again, fixed a course on the gate, pressed the accelerator as a second tank exploded, turning the sky white and the world a fiery crimson.

The jeep danced, bounced, lurched around. Solo fought the wheel, straightening it. The outward blast of air, the savage pull of the vacuum held the car, trembling.

"Faster!" Illya shouted in Solo's ears, hanging on to the windshield with all his strength. The heat was intense, unbearable. Ahead of them stretched the dark empty desert, so close, but suddenly an eternity removed beyond the peri meter of the exploding refinery. "Can't you go faster?"

"I've got the pedal on the floor now!" Napoleon Solo shouted.

But Illya Kuryakin couldn't even hear him above the scream of the flames, the roar of chain explosions. The fire reached out after them. Solo thrust down on the gas as hard as he could, looking back across his shoulder.

They'd get away, by a whisker. No one else would, barring a miracle. That hell of solid flame was too pulverizing in its intensity to offer any chance for survival.

Solo sighed. Pretty Wilde had been a lot of woman. It was hard to think of her charred and dead. What a waste of loveliness!

But there was new work to be done, new girls to meet. He nodded, forced the car forward into the night, smiling.